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**‘Men who are Men and Women Who Are Women’:  
Fascism, Psychology and Feminist Resistance in  
the Work of Winifred Holtby**

by

Lisa Regan

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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# **‘Men who are Men and Women Who Are Women’: Fascism, Psychology and Feminist Resistance in the Work of Winifred Holtby**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

## Summary

Winifred Holtby was a novelist, journalist and feminist, writing in the 1920s and 1930s. This thesis focuses on her feminist resistance to the fashion for sexual division in interwar Britain. She reads it as a social and political backlash against women's equal rights that seeks to drive women out of the workplace and back into the home. In Holtby's view, the popularisation of Freud and the growing appeal of fascism contribute to this backlash by stressing women's primary role as wives and mothers. For Holtby, Sir Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, sums up this fashion for sexual division when he declares in 1932, 'we want men who are men and women who are women'.

Previous scholarship has focused on Holtby's work in dialogue with her friend and fellow feminist, Vera Brittain. This thesis adopts a more panoramic perspective to consider Holtby's work in the context of other feminist contemporaries and in the context of feminist intellectual history. Each chapter examines how Holtby draws inspiration from a figure in feminist history in order to challenge the influences of psychology and fascism on attitudes to women between the wars.

Holtby declared that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was the 'bible of the women's movement' and the first chapter examines Wollstonecraft's influence on Holtby's feminist thought. The second chapter considers Holtby's defence of the spinster against interwar prejudice that castigated the spinster as sexually frustrated and psychologically abnormal. By subverting Charlotte Brontë's romance narratives for an interwar 'feminine middlebrow' readership, Holtby valorises women's work in the community. The third chapter addresses the fascist veneration of motherhood, analysing how Holtby recognises and assimilates the feminist potential of Alfred Adler's theory of Individual Psychology to her anti-fascist critique.



# **‘Men who are Men and Women Who Are Women’: Fascism, Psychology and Feminist Resistance in the Work of Winifred Holtby**

## **Introduction**

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*[W]e want men who are men and women who are women. - Oswald Mosley <sup>1</sup>*

To judge from many modern writers we might indeed think that men and women inhabited different worlds, black and white, sixes and sevens, meaning different things for the two sexes. Does Mrs. Woolf want us to make it possible for women to be artists because sex indeed strikes a dividing line from Heaven down to the roots of the earth, with all men on one side and all women on the other? “Women’s world”, “women’s interests”, “women’s tastes,” “women’s brains” say the contemporary newspapers, magazines, advertisements. Does she share the fashionable belief in complete and unalterable division? - Winifred Holtby <sup>2</sup>

In 1932 Winifred Holtby published the first critical appreciation of Virginia Woolf in English. Herself a renowned journalist, feminist campaigner and prolific novelist, Holtby relished the challenge of engaging with the work of a female writer so different from her own conventional realist genre. Yet Holtby was to find contradictions in Woolf’s thought and writing that troubled her own feminist beliefs in equality and non-gendered citizenship. She was forced to ask if Woolf really did subscribe to the theory of creative androgyny, so persuasively explored in *A Room of One’s Own*, or whether in fact Woolf was seduced by the ‘fashionable belief’ in

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<sup>1</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: B.U.F., 1934; first pub.1932), p.54.

<sup>2</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (Chicago: Academy Press, 1978; first pub. 1932), p.176.



sexual division so predominant in the years following the First World War. Holtby's anxieties about where this fashion for sexual division might lead found substance in Oswald Mosley's call for 'men who are men and women who are women', quoted from his fascist manifesto *The Greater Britain*, also published in 1932. Mosley had just left the Labour Party to found his British Union of Fascists and promised national regeneration through securing the male breadwinner's wage. He also pledged to 'treat the wife and mother as one of the main pillars of the State' (Mosley, p.56). These were two policies that were not unrelated in Holtby's view and which suspiciously echoed Hitler's back to home policy on women in Nazi Germany.<sup>3</sup>

As Holtby's anxieties about Woolf's susceptibility to the pervasive fashion for sexual division reveal, Mosley's calls for sex distinction were buoyed up on a strong cultural and political swell against women's emancipation. The interwar years have been widely characterised as an era of conservative gender politics that sought to reinstate sexual division by advocating women's return to the home in the wake of social, political and economic instability after the First World War. Deirdre Beddoe affirms this in her aptly entitled, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939*, foregrounding that '[t]he single most arresting feature of the interwar years was the strength of the notion that women's place is in the home'.<sup>4</sup> Wartime had

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<sup>3</sup> Hitler's solution to the unemployment problem in Germany of removing Jews and women from industrial and professional positions was well-known amongst feminists in the 1930s. As Holtby observes in 1934, 'Hitler began his drive "back to the kitchen". Wherever possible women in administrative positions have been replaced by men.' See Winifred Holtby, 'Fear and the Woman Who Earns', 9 March 1934, *News Chronicle* in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. and intro. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.81-83 (p.81). For detailed discussions of fascist policy on women see Martin Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London: Routledge 1988), *passim* and Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement, 1923-1945* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2000), p.93-135.

<sup>4</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989), p.3. Alison Light has challenged this assumption by exploring the literary representations of the interwar home as sites of conservative modernity. In her view, 'Far from seeing the interwar period as one in which women simply went 'back to home and duty', we need to ask ourselves how their conception of both had changed'. See Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.126.



produced a confusion of gender roles. Men returned from the front maimed and incapacitated by shell-shock, dependent on women to care and provide for them. Women, by contrast, had served at the war-front as nurses and ambulance drivers, whilst at home they had expanded into occupations previously dominated by men, taking up positions as munitions workers, postal workers, bus drivers and joining the 'Land Army' as agricultural labourers. With the war over, however, this confusion of gender roles provoked fear and hostility: women were vilified for stealing demobilised soldiers' jobs and feminists were accused of waging a 'sex war'.<sup>5</sup> For many the answer was, in Mosley's words, to demand 'men who are men and women who are women'. As Susan Kingsley Kent encapsulates, '[t]he perceived blurring of gender lines by war's upheaval led many in British society to see in a reestablishment of sexual difference the means to create a semblance of order'.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis examines Holtby's feminist resistance to what Kingsley-Kent describes as 'a reestablishment of sexual difference' between the wars. Unlike Kingsley-Kent, however, I adopt the analytical term sexual division rather than sexual difference. Holtby herself refers to the 'dividing line' or 'division' between the sexes, as we see in the epigraph above. She also uses the term sexual difference at various points in her work. Yet, I refrain from adopting the latter term for this study because since the 1980s it has become associated with a psychoanalytic feminist approach that addresses questions on the production of sexual identity at the point when psychic structures, social structures and biological categories meet.<sup>7</sup> Such questions are not

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of the 'sex war' as presented in the 1920s media, see Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp.17-34. For a discussion of male attitudes to women's social and economic emancipation post-war, see David Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1999), p.8-57.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.99.

<sup>7</sup> Debra Keates, 'Sexual Difference' in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp.402-405 (p.403).



the focus of this project, which is concerned with the lived reality of gender identity rather than its production. When the British fascist leader, Oswald Mosley demanded ‘men who are men and women who are women’, he was not referring to how humans become sexed beings via the Oedipus Complex but to how, in his view, reality is structured according to two mutually exclusive sexual categories. Parveen Adams offers a succinct summary of this distinction between ‘sexual difference’ and ‘sexual division’. ‘[S]exual *differences*’, she argues, are ‘the production of differences through systems of representation’ such as fantasy or ideology. On the other hand, ‘[I]n terms of sexual division, what has to be explained is how reality functions to effect the continuation of *its* already given divisions’, namely ‘two mutually exhaustive groups, concrete men and women’.<sup>8</sup> Winifred Holtby’s fictional and non-fictional work draws attention to how these divisions between men and women were drawn between the wars and perpetuated through the popularisation of psychology and the rise of fascism.

She observes that the interwar pressure towards sexual division gathers momentum on a variety of fronts: culturally and socially through an explosion of media - magazines, newspapers, adverts, cinemas – and even in shifting clothes fashions; economically through focusing on the home as a new feminine consumer market; and politically through legislation privileging the home as the proper sphere of female labour over industry and the professions. In examining Holtby’s interrogation of these cultural and political trends, this study seeks to add a new dimension to scholarly interest in Holtby’s work by contextualising her thought within a feminist intellectual history of ideas.

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<sup>8</sup> Parveen Adams, ‘A Note on the Division Between Sexual Division and Sexual Differences’ in *The Woman Question: m/f*, ed. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (London: Verso, 1990), pp.102-109 (pp.102-103).



In this introduction, a short biography is followed by an overview of how biographical, historical and literary approaches to Holtby's work have largely focused on her friendship with fellow feminist, Vera Brittain. A consideration of how Holtby's feminist thought might be more comprehensively considered in the context of a feminist history of ideas follows. Finally, I close with a synopsis of the three chapters, indicating the direction the thesis will take.

### **The Life of Winifred Holtby**

Born in 1898 Holtby grew up on a farm in North Yorkshire, the youngest daughter of David and Alice Holtby. Between 1909 and 1916, she attended Queen Margaret's School in Scarborough. After a year working in a London nursing home, she briefly entered Somerville College, Oxford to read Modern History in 1917. Holtby felt duty bound to contribute to the war effort and after joining the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps as a private in 1917, was posted as a hostel forewoman to serve in France at a signals unit near Abbeville. Here Holtby formed a very close and enduring friendship with her administrator, Jean McWilliam, also an Oxford educated woman who went on to become the head teacher of a girls' school in Pretoria, South Africa. Holtby returned home from service in 1919 to discover that the post-war agricultural depression had forced her family to sell up the farm at Rudston and move into a suburb of Hull. She returned to Oxford to complete her history degree, where she met Vera Brittain in 1919, who was to become her life-long friend.

After graduating from Oxford, Holtby decided to launch her writing career. Having begun work on her first novel, *Anderby Wold* ( published in 1923), she had her first article accepted by the feminist journal *Time and Tide* in 1924 and became a firm friend and colleague of the journal's founder and editor, Lady Margaret



Rhondda thereafter. Between January and August 1926 Holtby conducted a lecture tour of South Africa. The aim was to meet up briefly with Jean McWilliam, still teaching in Pretoria, and then tour Cape Town and Johannesburg. The six-month trip, however, sparked Holtby's passionate commitment to campaigns for racial equality and black Trade unionism in South Africa.

On her return from South Africa, Holtby's career blossomed. She became one of the most renowned journalists of the interwar period, writing for a multitude of different papers and journals, ranging from the feminist *Time and Tide*, to the *Manchester Guardian* and *Yorkshire Post*. In 1926, she was even appointed as a director of *Time and Tide* by Lady Rhondda. Between 1927 and 1936, Holtby published four novels, two plays, a collection of short stories, a satire and the first critical work in English on Virginia Woolf. Her prolific career was cut short, however, in 1935, when she finally succumbed to the renal failure brought on by Bright's disease. The symptoms were first diagnosed in 1932 and, defying the doctors' prognoses, Holtby soldiered on until 1935, managing to complete her most famous and enduring novel in that time. *South Riding*, was published posthumously in 1936. Having never fallen out of print, this novel has sustained Holtby's popularity as a novelist for future generations, providing the inspiration not only for Victor Saville's 1938 film adaptation but also for a period drama televised by Yorkshire Television in the 1960s. Virago selected *South Riding* for publication in 1988 and has since reprinted it over seven times, as well as publishing Holtby's other five novels, short stories and journalism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This biographical summary is based on Marion Shaw's account of Holtby's life in *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999; repr. 2000).



## “Miss Vera Holtby!”: Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain

Despite her professional success as a journalist during her lifetime and her posthumous renown as a novelist, the memory of Holtby has remained inextricable from the life and work of her friend, Vera Brittain. Even when Holtby was alive, she and Vera Brittain were popularly considered one and the same. In 1934, for instance, Holtby wrote to her good friend Vera Brittain, ‘We are so entangled now in people’s minds that Lady Steel Maitland, my chairman at Thursday’s meeting, introduced me as “Miss Vera Holtby!” to loud laughter and applause’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it seems that not only were Holtby and Brittain ‘entangled’ in the interwar imagination but have remained so in the feminist imagination ever since, often to the detriment of Holtby’s status as a noteworthy feminist intellectual.<sup>11</sup> Up until the 1980s, the only extensive studies of Holtby were two biographies, published shortly after her death: one by her journalist colleague, Evelyn White *Winifred Holtby As I Knew Her* (1938)<sup>12</sup> and the other, Brittain’s famous *Testament of Friendship* (1940). White’s biography was bland but factual and lacked the emotional engagement of Brittain’s account, in which Holtby is described as ‘the best friend that life has given me’.<sup>13</sup> Brittain’s powerful claims on Holtby’s personality and professional success in *Testament of Friendship* have haunted receptions of Holtby’s work ever since.

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<sup>10</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Local Studies Library, Hull Central Library, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 4 November 1934, fol. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Showalter’s recent study of feminist intellectual history insists that Holtby accepted the role of old maid aunt next to ‘the dazzling Vera’ since ‘Both Holtby and Brittain’ in Showalter’s words ‘had always expected that Vera – the fragile pretty one – would marry and that Winifred – the hulking hearty one – would not. See Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (New York: Scribner, 2001), pp.172-173.

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn White, *Winifred Holtby As I Knew Her: A Study of the Author and Her Works* (London: Collins, 1938).

<sup>13</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby*, afterword by Rosalind Delmar (London: Virago, 1980; first pub.1940), p.4.



The Brittain-Holtby friendship has become an almost iconic partnership, symbolising feminist sisterhood.<sup>14</sup> Since the 1980s Holtby's famous friendship with Brittain has motivated much of the scholarly interest in her as a feminist writer. Lesbian interpretations of the friendship read Holtby and Brittain as radicals, challenging the heterosexual matrix, sometimes finding Brittain guilty of censoring its latent lesbian desire.<sup>15</sup> Whether their relationship is viewed as erotic or not, their choice to live together in London after Brittain's marriage in a ménage à trois has equally been interpreted as sexually radical.<sup>16</sup> A number of studies look beyond debates around the potentially erotic dimension to their friendship and define the relationship according to Adrienne Rich's concept of 'primary intensity'.<sup>17</sup> In the same vein, this study does not propose to add any further speculations to the field of scholarly interest around the romantic or erotic nature of Holtby's relationship with Brittain. I read it simply as one of 'primary emotional intensity' that may, in its earlier

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Berry, for instance, exalts their relationship as 'a friendship of rare nobility' and 'an affinity of spirits' in Paul Berry, 'A Marvellous Friendship' in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. and intro. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.3-16 (p.15). See also Janice Raymond's philosophical exploration of the importance of female friendship to a feminist politics of difference which takes a quotation from Vera Brittain's *Testament of Friendship* on her friendship with Holtby as its epigraph. Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends* (London: The Women's Press, 1986; repr.1991).

<sup>15</sup> The growing suspicion and hostility towards female friendships as deviant under the influences of psychology and sexology in the interwar period, provoked rumours about the two women. Holtby dismissed them jovially as 'Too, too Chelsea!' according to Brittain (*Testament of Friendship*, p.118) but critics have argued that Holtby's and Brittain's relationship was lesbian and that Brittain attempted to cover it up for respectability. Sheila Jeffreys claims, for instance, that Brittain's biography of Holtby, *Testament of Friendship*, represents a public renunciation of their alleged lesbianism. See Shelia Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985), p.152. Pam Johnson, in her attempt to recover Holtby for a lesbian history finds Holtby's story bedevilled by interwar heterosexism and accuses Brittain of fabricating a heterosexual romance for Holtby's life-story to dispel rumours of their lesbianism. See Pam Johnson, ' "The Best Friend Whom Life Has Given Me": Does Winifred Holtby have a place in lesbian history?' in *Lesbian History Group, Not A Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History, 1840- 1985* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), pp.141-157 (pp.146-157).

<sup>16</sup> John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties: Aspects Of Writing And Popular Culture* (Nottingham: Fine Leaves Publications, 1997), p.121.

<sup>17</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow (London: Virago, 1990), pp.212-241 (p.227)



stages, have been erotic but emerged as a source of continual emotional support for both women.

Literary approaches to the friendship, premised on the assumption of 'primary emotional intensity' have analysed the written exchanges between the two friends, examining Holtby and Brittain's correspondence and fiction as discursive spaces of intellectual, creative and emotional negotiation. The two main contributors to this approach are Jean Kennard, who idealises the partnership as a mutually reinforcing process of mother-daughter identification<sup>18</sup> and Diana Wallace who examines the competitive rivalry between the two friends through Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism'.<sup>19</sup> Kennard's and Wallace's considerations of the friendship in terms of literary 'conversation' and 'dialogue' certainly move beyond scholarly speculations on its emotional and sexual nature and open up more fruitful readings of the friendship as an intellectual space for political and literary negotiation.

For all this, however, Kennard and Wallace continue the trend of reading Holtby's life and work under the shadow of Vera Brittain's influence. Granted their work moves beyond the attempts to appropriate Holtby to late twentieth century constructions of a lesbian history; yet their emphasis on dialogue via object-relations theory and Bakhtin still locks Holtby into a one-to-one with Brittain that occludes a more comprehensive reading of her work in dialogue with other intellectual, historical and political influences. For both Kennard and Wallace, their feminist commitment to recuperating and analysing female friendship fails to consider Holtby as an intellectual and political thinker in her own right, whose journalism and fiction not

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Kennard, *Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership* (London: University Press of New England, 1989), pp.14-17.

<sup>19</sup> Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Fiction 1914-1939* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp.117-118.

only responded to Brittain's thought but also to broader cultural and political trends militating against women's emancipation between the wars.

### A 'Clear Stream': Holtby as a Woman of her Time

In this thesis, I am therefore concerned to unshackle Holtby's feminist thought from Brittain's and situate her challenge to inequalities based on sexual division in a wider network of feminist thought. This approach owes much to Marion Shaw's recent account of Holtby's life and work in *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby*. The title of Shaw's biography is taken from the opening anecdote of *Testament of Friendship* where Brittain self-consciously relates a time, just before Holtby's death, when Holtby was requested by three London publishers to write an autobiography. Holtby's response was characteristically self-effacing:

"I don't see how I can write an autobiography," she said. "I never feel I've really had a life of my own. My existence seems to me like a clear stream which has simply reflected other people's stories and problems." (*Testament of Friendship*, p.1)

Shaw's approach to Holtby's life takes issue with Brittain's depiction of it in *Testament of Friendship*. Though Shaw accepts the facts of this earlier biography, she disagrees with Brittain's emphasis on Holtby as a self-sacrificing, saintly friend, 'a clear stream' reflecting Brittain's professional and personal achievements. Shaw aims to 'colour the stream of her [Holtby's] life with other tinctures of her personality. By reflecting other stories as well as Vera's and by placing Vera's story in the context of these other reflections'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999; repr. 2000), p.10.



Indeed, organising Holtby's biography around her relationships with others rather than chronologically, Shaw structures her account of Holtby's life around other female figures - Holtby's mother, Jean McWilliam, Lady Margaret Rhondda and Virginia Woolf – rather than just Britain. She also includes important men in Holtby's life such as Harry Pearson (Holtby's life-long romantic interest), George Catlin (Britain's husband) and William Ballinger (a political worker sent over to help organise the Black Trade Union Movement through Holtby's campaigns and fund-raising). The effect of Shaw's work is to locate Holtby, not simply within the personal confines of her friendship with Britain, but within a much larger political and intellectual network of the 1920s and 1930s. As Shaw makes clear from the outset:

Winifred's feminism, pacifism and socialism, her anti-racist campaigns and her intense commitment to the ideal of the woman citizen in the years after 1918 when women began to be enfranchised on an equal basis with men, make her an index of many of the progressive movements of the inter-war period. (Shaw,p.2)

Shaw colours in the 'clear stream' of Holtby's life, highlighting the reflections of other friends and colleagues aside from Britain in Holtby's life-story. In this way, she also succeeds in depicting Holtby as a woman of her time, whose life reflected momentous historical and political change. Alison Oram's study of the figure of the spinster in interwar discourses of psychology and sexology has also contributed to this image of Holtby. In her paper entitled, 'Repressed and Thwarted or Bearer of the New World?: The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses', Oram numbers Holtby amongst a limited selection of feminist voices resistant to heterosexual hegemony and



sexual division who remained a stalwart paladin for the maligned spinster.<sup>21</sup> Shaw and Oram's work provides an excellent foundation from which to consider Holtby within a broader cultural and political context. Both, however, confine their considerations of Holtby to the interwar period and though Oram is right to point to Holtby's resistance to the heterosexual bias of interwar psychology and sexology, she does not explore the intellectual and political inspiration for Holtby's resistance.

In my view, Holtby draws inspiration from feminist thinkers of previous generations to combat the pressures towards sexual division, in addition to those of the early twentieth century. Where Shaw's project was to colour in the 'clear stream' of Holtby's personal and professional life, mine is to colour in the 'clear stream' of Holtby's intellectual life by examining some of the myriad intellectual and political influences reflected in her journalism and fiction. Elaborating on Shaw and Oram's portrayals of Holtby as a woman embedded in the cultural and political debates of her time, this study considers Holtby's place within feminist intellectual and literary history.

### **Feminist History: Paradoxes and Contradictions**

My approach to Holtby is indebted to a trend in feminist scholarship since the 1980s, seeking to trace the intellectual history of ideas within a tradition of feminist thought. Such preoccupations are evident in the work of Denise Riley and Sally Alexander<sup>22</sup> and recent additions to this trend have been Carolyn Burdett's *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution Gender and Empire* (2001) and Barbara Taylor's *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (2002). Both

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<sup>21</sup> Alison Oram, 'Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Interwar Feminist Discourses', *Women's History Review*, volume 1, number 3, 1992, 413-433 (425-427).

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?': *Feminism and the Category of Woman in History* (London: Pandora, 1988), *passim* and Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994), pp.203-247.



Burdett and Taylor are committed to writing a feminist intellectual history that takes as its starting point the paradoxes and contradictions thrown up by situating feminist thought in the historical and political moment of production. Exploring Olive Schreiner's place in relation to discourses of progress and the nature of woman, Burdett focuses in particular on Schreiner's engagement with evolutionary science and eugenics. As a woman of colonial status, Schreiner represents for Burdett a woman 'compelled creatively to work with various productive contradictions' whose ambivalent stance to modernity rendered her 'a critic of progress who never abandoned her commitment to it'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Taylor embraces the contradictions inherent in Mary Wollstonecraft's eighteenth century thought and its legacy for feminism, urging for 'a less donnish, more psychologically generous view of intellectual creativity' where 'paradoxes and contradictions are no longer embarrassments to be brushed aside, but keys to a realm of hidden meanings'.<sup>24</sup> Burdett and Taylor's studies and their bearing on Holtby's understanding of Schreiner and Wollstonecraft's legacies for interwar feminism will be considered in more detail in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Paradoxes and contradictions have inevitably surfaced in my reading of Holtby's feminist thought and her understanding of feminist history within the interwar context. Holtby's feminist position might be broadly defined as egalitarian and a 1926 journal article, entitled 'Feminism Divided' presents one of the boldest statements of her feminist beliefs:

Personally, I am a feminist and an Old Feminist, because I dislike everything that feminism implies. I desire an end of the whole business, the demands for equality, the

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<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender and Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p.6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2003), p.21.



suggestions of sex warfare, the very name of feminist. I want to be about the work in which my real interests lie, the study of inter-race relationships, the writing of novels and so forth. But while the inequality exists, while injustice is done and opportunity denied to the vast majority of women, I shall have to be a feminist, and an Old Feminist, with the motto Equality First. And I shan't be happy until I get it.<sup>25</sup>

Holtby's commitment to equality places her in an ambivalent position to the very name of 'feminism' in this passage. Feminism, for Holtby, is defined here as a necessary evil, a means to an end. The implication is that feminism is by no means Holtby's 'real interest' but rather a duty and responsibility, a sideline distinct from her literary endeavours or her campaigns for racial equality in South Africa. Holtby paradoxically proclaims and denounces feminism with her candid admission – 'I dislike everything that feminism implies' – which is disarming and intentionally so. The term 'feminist' was still relatively new, having only passed into the English language around 1894.<sup>26</sup> Initially, it had assumed its meaning from the French 'le féminisme' to mean women's fight for suffrage but with this partially won after the First World War, it began to assume new and more derogatory connotations. Between the wars, feminists came under attack and were charged with initiating a 'sex war' on the home front.<sup>27</sup> The label of 'feminist' came to mean unwomanly woman and 'man-hater'. So fraught had the word 'feminist' become that Virginia Woolf vaunted her

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<sup>25</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Feminism Divided' in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), p.47-50 (p.48). Further page references hereafter denoted by *TG* in the main text.

<sup>26</sup> Karen Offen, *European Feminisms 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.19.

<sup>27</sup> As early as 1913, quasi-Darwinist rhetoric was adopted to denounce feminists as unwomanly antagonists. Walter Heape laments 'To-day woman is fighting independently of man: she is conducting her own war . . . the war is a sex war'. See Walter Heape, *Sex Antagonism* (London: Constable & Co, 1913), p.205. Once the twenties were underway, proto-fascists thinkers like Anthony M. Ludovici were outraged by 'the growth of Feminism [that] has been so steady and so insidious, that thousands of men and women to-day are Feminists without knowing it'. See Anthony M. Ludovici, *Woman: A Vindication* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1923), p.278.



disapproval of it in 1938 as ‘a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete’.<sup>28</sup>

For Holtby feminism was simply a means to an end, defined by its resistance to civil inequalities founded on sexual division. In 1926, she outlined her central feminist belief that ‘the line of sex differentiation, with men above and women below . . . and the attempt to preserve it by political and economic laws and social traditions, not only checks the development of woman’s personality, but prevents her from making that contribution to the common good’ (‘Feminism Divided’, TG,p.48). Eight years later, she remained committed to the idea that progress lay in eradicating categories of biological and material distinction as the foundation for economic, social and political policy:

It seems possible that in a wiser world we should walk more delicately. We might, perhaps, consider individuals as individuals, not primarily as members of this or that race, sex and status. We might be content to love the individual, perceiving in him or her a spirit which is divine as well as human and which has little to do with the accident of the body. We might allow individual ability rather than social tradition to determine what vocation each member of our community should follow. (Women,p.192)

Holtby’s concept of feminism would seem in many ways to correspond to a transhistorical definition of the women’s movement’s aims to challenge masculine privilege and female subordination. Yet, her preference for eliding biological and material distinctions under the over-arching category of the human produces blind spots and contradictions in her feminist thought around questions of race and class. As mentioned above, Holtby was committed to campaigning for racial equality. After her

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* ed. and intro. Morag Shiach (Oxford: O.U.P., 1992; first pub. 1938), p.302.



1926 lecture tour of South Africa, she dedicated much of her time and money to aiding the development of Black Trade Unionism in South Africa. Despite this, however, her attitudes towards Black Africans were sometimes patronising and imperialistic, viewing them as children requiring the guidance of developed countries. This was, however, as Barbara Bush has argued an inevitable symptom of early twentieth century British imperialism and socialism, a disturbing contradiction of Holtby being so much a woman of her time.<sup>29</sup> Equally, Holtby's perceptions of 'status' or class were often blind-sided by her well-intentioned belief in looking beyond social and biological differences. As Carol Dyhouse has rightly observed, Holtby was prone to assuming that the gains for professional middle-class women also extended to working class industrial women workers and that problems of unequal pay and exploitation could be solved for both classes of women through trade unionism.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary feminist reviewers of Holtby's history of women's progress, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, also accused her of blindly assuming that advancements for working class women had matched those for middle-class women in both the home and workplace.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> According to Barbara Bush most white Britons, including liberal intellectuals and racial equality campaigners, shared deeply ingrained prejudices against Blacks and stereotyped them as primitive, superstitious and childish, such that '[e]ven the friends of the black man, like Holtby, were not free from such attitudes'. See Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.198-218 (p.215).

<sup>30</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1880-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.81.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, in her review of Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Naomi Mitchison remarked 'I cannot help wondering if she has written the book too exclusively from the standpoint of the professional middle-class woman?. It is hard to see beyond one's own wider interests, but I wish there had been more about the working woman, and especially about the working woman's concept of home'. See Naomi Mitchison, 'The Reluctant Feminists', *Left Review*, vol. 3, December 1934, 93-94 (93). In a more biting critique of *Women and a Changing Civilisation's*, Philippa Polsen complains, 'This complacency on the part of one of the accepted champions of women seems both dangerous and fallacious' and finally decides that 'Winifred Holtby is not concerned with the working woman – in all conscience she couldn't be'. See Philippa Polsen, 'Feminists and the Woman Question', *Left Review*, vol. 12, September 1935, 500-502 (500; 502).



Even on the question of sex distinction, Holtby was not always as consistent as we might expect. Though she rejected inequalities premised on sexual division, this did not mean that she repudiated sexual division entirely. Hers was not an abstract notion of equality built on androgyny and sameness. As she made clear in 1926:

The Old Feminists have also looked ahead, beyond the achievement of the reforms for which they are now working. They also have their vision of society, a society in which sex-differentiation concerns those things alone which by the physical laws of nature it must govern, a society in which men and women work together for the good of all mankind; a society in which there is no respect of persons, either male or female, but a supreme regard for the importance of the human being. And when that dream is a reality, they will say farewell to feminism, as to a disbanded but victorious army, with honour for its heroes, gratitude for its sacrifice, and profound relief that the hour for its necessity has passed. (*TG*, pp.49-50)

Holtby's 1926 article was intended as a counter-attack to so-called 'New Feminists' headed by the socialist feminist and independent liberal MP, Eleanor Rathbone. The end of feminism for Holtby is the end of sexual division or 'sex differentiation' (as she terms it in this 1926 article) as a dominating social and political force and the establishment of 'a society in which there is no respect of persons, either male or female'. Feminists like Rathbone, however, proclaimed this end had been achieved with the partial enfranchisement and sought to extend feminism's aims away from equality on the same terms as men towards demands centred on women as wives and mothers. Holtby's 1926 article, 'Feminism Divided', was published just after Rathbone had realigned the priorities of the National Union of Societies of Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) away from egalitarian calls for equal work for equal pay to more



specifically woman-centred policies of birth control and family endowment.<sup>32</sup> This division between the egalitarian and woman-centred feminists became most vociferous on the subject of protective legislation. Rathbone's supporters argued it was a positive measure that would reduce exploitation and maltreatment of women in the workplace but egalitarian feminists like Holtby believed it would give employers yet another excuse to discriminate against women. Holtby's main contention here with Rathbone's brand of woman-centred feminism lay in its myopic assumption that equality had already been won. As Holtby clarifies, the 'new' feminists assumed the striving for equality to be won with the partial vote in 1918 and the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act<sup>33</sup> but overlooked that many women did not yet have the vote (Holtby herself for one, writing as a single female non-property owner) not only in Britain but also throughout the world.

Despite her 1926 contentions with Rathbone's feminist agenda, Holtby did recognise that the physical facts of 'sex differentiation' could not simply be argued away. As a consequence, Holtby's feminism increasingly accommodated issues around sexuality and maternity within its demands for equality. Susan Pedersen, reflecting on Holtby's and Rathbone's feminisms in the conservative 1930s, has also noted their convergence: 'Winifred Holtby and Eleanor Rathbone had been on different sides of the "new feminism" argument [ . . . ] Yet when the two women paused to assess the movement's achievements, they found themselves unable to

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed discussion of the shifts in the feminist movement between the wars see Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s in *British Feminism In The Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Aldershot; Edward Elgar, 1990), 66-83; Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp.235-263; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: O.U.P.,1997), pp.173-216.

<sup>33</sup> This decreed: 'A person shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function, or from being appointed to or holding any civil or judicial office or post, or from entering or assuming or carrying on any civil profession or vocation'. Cited in Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London: Virago, 1978; rep. 1999; first pub. 1933), p.504.



disentangle those competing ideals'.<sup>34</sup> For instance, there is evidence to suggest that Holtby was certainly not adverse to the causes advocated by feminists like Rathbone. Her belief in the importance of birth control to securing women's personal, sexual and economic freedoms surfaced increasingly in her 1930s work, and in 1934 she argued that 'the consequences of scientific birth control have been perhaps the greatest assets which modern civilisation has given to women'.<sup>35</sup> This belief was played out in her final novel, *South Riding* (1936) which also touches upon issues of birth control in its representation of the working-class mother and the fatal consequences of bearing too many children.<sup>36</sup> Holtby was also more supportive of Rathbone's demand for family endowment than her article 'Feminism Divided' would have us believe. As she highlights in 1934, egalitarian and difference feminists alike had campaigned for the 1925 Widows Pensions Act to offer payment to those women unable to work after the loss of the male breadwinner in the First World War. Family endowment, in Holtby's view, was simply an extension of this and she decided that 'so long as the family is as firmly imbedded in our social structure as it is to-day, some such redistribution of income has great advantages' (Women, pp.94-95).

Holtby's contradictory stance on the issues around women's sexuality and maternity, so central to Rathbone's feminism, are emblematic of the feminist dilemma over difference and equality that persists today. Julia Kristeva in her essay, 'Women's Time' addresses this conundrum through the metaphor of history. Here, equality feminism, epitomised by First Wave feminists like Holtby, represents women's bid to emulate men and join linear history by repressing their femininity. Difference

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<sup>34</sup> Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.196-197.

<sup>35</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (Chicago: Academy Press, 1978; first pub. 1934), p.169.

<sup>36</sup> Winifred Holtby, *South Riding: An English Landscape* (London: Virago, 1988; repr. 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2000; first pub. Collins & Co, 1936), pp.176-181.



feminism is embodied by the second wave feminism after 1968 and stresses women's essential difference from men by demanding to remain outside linear time. Kristeva signals towards a third generation, which might exist in parallel with the two previous generations of feminism as a single 'signifying space' of fluid sexual identity.<sup>37</sup> To reach this point through her dialectic, however, Kristeva assumes an oversimplified view of First Wave Feminism, judging it to be unified by its demand to join linear (political and historical) time. Yet interwar feminism, like nineteenth century feminism before it, did not perceive itself according to these divisions. Rathbone's calls for birth control and family endowment, though specifically intended to advance women's position as mothers, were intricately directed to reforming the political and historical, linear time through her commitment to parliamentary lobbying. Equally, Holtby's commitment to erasing 'sex differentiation' before the law did not necessarily entail forgetting her own status as an unmarried woman or dismissing demands for reform in maternity and childcare.

In a deconstructive move, Joan W. Scott has argued that historically feminist arguments do not fall neatly into the categories of equality and difference. Instead they are often characterised by their ability to highlight rather than solve contradictions, by their challenge to sexual and political stereotypes and, importantly, by their attempt to reconcile calls for equality with sexual difference. The way forward according to Scott is for feminism to critique categories of difference and refuse them based on a call for equality that rests on paving the way for a greater play of difference.<sup>38</sup> This is the position that Holtby moves towards at the end of her 1934

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<sup>37</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Blackwell: Oxford, 1986), pp.187-213 (pp.193-195; pp.209-211).

<sup>38</sup> Joan W. Scott, 'Deconstructing the Equality-versus Difference: or the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism' in *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Anne C. Herrman and Abigail J. Stewart (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), pp.358-369 (p.366-69).



history of women's progress, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* where, as we see above, she demands that biological differences be removed as bars to equal rights and opportunities, in order to 'leave room for individual difference' (*Women*, p.191). As she clarifies: 'the real object behind our demand is not to reduce all men and women to the same dull pattern. It is rather to release their richness of variety' (*Women*, p.192). Denise Riley follows a similar line of thought to Scott and offers the following summation of feminist thought between the wars, suggesting that:

The impasse for feminism in the 1920s and 1930s was acute [. . .] The result was a nervous hesitation between 'equality' and 'difference', or a search for the fragile meridian position which saw women as 'different but equal'.<sup>39</sup>

Despite claims to the contrary in 1926, much of Holtby's feminist thought suggests that she too was in search of this elusively 'fragile meridian' between equality and difference.

Holtby's deceptively simple statements of her feminist thought led her into some paradoxical and contradictory places as regards her identification with feminist aims, as well as her attitudes to class, imperialism and sexual divisions. The main focus of this thesis, however, lies in Holtby's interrogation of sexual division both within and outside feminist thought between the wars. Though the contradictions around class and race within Holtby's thought often overlap with this, a full exploration of them lies beyond the scope of this present study. Instead, I am concerned to highlight the contradictions around Holtby's resistance to the discourses

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<sup>39</sup> Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of Woman in History* (London: Pandora, 1988), p.62.



of psychology and fascism, which she understood to espouse a gender ideology of sex segregation.

### **‘The Freudian Revelation’, Fascism and Feminism**

The importance of the ‘sex instinct’ to the interwar imagination owed much to the dissemination and popularisation of Freudian psychoanalysis after the First World War.<sup>40</sup> This thesis is concerned to analyse Holtby’s feminist thought in relation to what she terms ‘the Freudian revelation’ and its political and cultural ramifications for women between the wars. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, she specifically allies Freud’s concept of sexual instinct with fascist calls for sexual division. Here, she makes it clear that Mosley’s desire for ‘men who are men and women who are women’ (*Women*, p.161) is supported by Freud’s psychoanalytic theories: ‘[t]he whole force of the Freudian revelation, the “modern” morality and the fashionable insistence upon nerves rather than reasons, lies behind that choice’ to privilege women as mothers, wives and mistresses rather than human beings (*Women*, p.161).

Holtby reads Freud’s theories as complicit with fascist demands for sex segregation. Whilst this reading is central to my project, it is of course important to note that Holtby’s reading of Freud is contestable. Holtby reads a theoretical

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara Low’s popular handbook to psychoanalysis, *Psycho-Analysis: A Brief Account of Freudian Theory* (1920) became one of many works seeking to explain and popularise Freud’s theories between the wars. It explained the major tenets of psychoanalysis such as the unconscious, repression, and sublimation, as well as pointing to the wider cultural benefits of the ‘talking cure’ in social relations, education and treating shell-shocked soldiers. In addition, it listed ten of Freud’s works translated mostly by A. A. Brill into English by 1920, including *Three Contributions to Sexual Theory* (1910), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1913), *Totem and Taboo* (1918) and *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1920). See Barbara Low, *Psycho-Analysis: A Brief Account of Freudian Theory*, intro. Ernest Jones (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd; 1920), p.189. The increased reception of Freudian theory after 1919 has been attributed to the growth of popular psychology books that tapped into a cultural climate unsettled by war and social change. See L.S. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology, 1840-1940* (Methuen: London, 1964), pp.292-296. The appropriation of psychoanalysis to treat shell-shock and for theories of child development, as well literary interests in instinct and the unconscious, offered various sites for the wider dissemination of Freud into British culture. See R.D. Hinselwood, ‘Psychoanalysis in Britain: Points of Cultural Access, 1893-1918, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 1995, 76:1, 135-151, *passim*.



resonance between Freud and fascism. As a Jewish intellectual, Freud did not personally support fascism. The Nazis publicly burned his books in Berlin in 1933 and Freud fled from Austria to Britain when Hitler invaded in 1938.<sup>41</sup> Holtby's understanding that Freud's theory promoted the biological divisions of the sexes in the 1930s was shared by some feminists of the 1960s. Kate Millet, for example, argues that 'Sigmund Freud [was] beyond question the strongest individual counterrevolutionary force in the ideology of sexual politics during the period' and that he 'arrived upon the scene to clothe the old doctrine of separate spheres in the fashionable language of science'.<sup>42</sup> From the early 1970s, however, Juliet Mitchell's work has contested Freud's biological essentialism and paved the way for a feminist appropriation of his theories that analyses the production of gender identity under patriarchy. She asserts that 'Freud was concerned over and over again to establish that there was no one-to-one correlation between biology and psychology'.<sup>43</sup> Further, she argues that the intervention of the French post-structuralist and psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, has re-worked the traces of biological determinism in Freud's work to centre it on split subjectivities, language and the symbol of the phallus.<sup>44</sup> Certainly there are instances in Freud's work that support Mitchell's interpretation. At the close of his 1925 essay on 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction of the Sexes', Freud reflects on 'the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the

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<sup>41</sup> James Strachey, 'Sigmund Freud: His Life and Ideas' in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, 15 vols. (London: Penguin, 1991), I, 11-28 (p.28).

<sup>42</sup> Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977; rear. 1985; first pub. 1969), p.178.

<sup>43</sup> Juliet Mitchell, 'On Freud and the Distinction Between the Sexes' in *Women the Longest Revolution: Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1984), pp.221-232 (p.227).

<sup>44</sup> Juliet Mitchell, 'Freud and Lacan: Psychoanalytic Theories of Sexual Difference' in *Women the Longest Revolution: Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1984), pp.248-277, *passim*.



two sexes as completely equal in position and worth'.<sup>45</sup> Whilst such views will not dissuade him from arguing that the male and female paths through the Oedipus Complex are different, he nevertheless concedes 'that pure masculinity and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content' (*ibid*).

Holtby, however, remained convinced that 'the Freudian revelation' promoted sexual division in the interwar years. The reason for this perhaps lies in the way that Freud's concept of the sexual drive (Trieb) was translated into English and taken up by popular psychological writings as 'instinct'. Freud always distinguished a drive as psychosexual and an instinct as a biological need. Therefore, the translation of 'Trieb' into the English word 'instinct' is thought to have produced biologicistic readings of Freud.<sup>46</sup> Certainly from Holtby's perspective, the combined influence of Freud and fascism, generated definitions of womanhood according to sexual and maternal instinct. As she remarks, Mosley's demand 'We want men who are men and women who are women' is 'characteristic of a creed which places instinct above reason' (*Women*, p.161). Holtby believed the way to counter this cultural and political trend 'was to emphasise the importance of women's rights over instinct. Mary Wollstonecraft, as Chapter 1 demonstrates, was central to this feminist project. Chapters 2 and 3 develop this by examining how Holtby represents different aspects of womanhood, namely spinsterhood and motherhood, to challenge Mosley's concept of 'women who are women' (*Mosley*, p.54).

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<sup>45</sup> Freud, 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction of the Sexes', 1925 in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1977), VII, 323-344 (p.342).

<sup>46</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz, 'Drive' in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp.71-73 (p.71). Juliet Mitchell also notes that Strachey's use of the word 'instinct' is misleading because it suggests that the concept is purely biological rather than a '“frontier” concept between biology and psychology'. See Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p.21.



## Chapter Summary

Holtby's challenge to discourses of psychology and fascism went hand in hand with accounts of and allusions to a history of feminist demands for sexual equality. Holtby was a highly eclectic intellectual whose contemporary influences ranged from Bernard Shaw and T. E. Lawrence to Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf. As detailed above, many critics have focused on Vera Brittain as Holtby's primary intellectual influence and though Marion Shaw has touched on Holtby's working dialogue with Woolf,<sup>47</sup> much work still remains to be done on Holtby's other intellectual and political inspirations. As one of the first women to graduate from Oxford reading history, Holtby was strongly influenced by feminist thinkers of previous generations.

Her feminist challenge to the 'back to home' ethos of interwar politics and culture drew inspiration from Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Chapter 1 considers Holtby's place in a tradition of feminist thought that looks back to Mary Wollstonecraft, focusing on how and why she revitalises Wollstonecraft's call to 'see the distinction of sex confounded'.<sup>48</sup> The first chapter therefore sets out the interwar scene by outlining how the popularisation of Freudian psychology and the growth of fascism contributed to a climate pressing towards sex segregation and separate spheres. As such, it frames the starting point from which to view the development of Holtby's contribution to interwar feminist theory. Holtby's reception and adaptation of Mary Wollstonecraft within the interwar context invoke Wollstonecraft as a rational voice of equality from the past to counter

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<sup>47</sup> See Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999; repr. 2000), pp.247-258. Marion Shaw, 'Alien Experiences': Virginia Woolf, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain in the Thirties', *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (Harlow, Essex: Addison, Wesley & Longman, 1997), pp.37-52, *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ed. and intro. Miriam Brody (London: Penguin, 1975; repr.1992; first pub. 1792), p.148-49.



what Holtby reads as the anti-rational forces of sexual division embodied by fascist leaders like Oswald Mosley and by Freudian theory. In Holtby's eyes, Wollstonecraft's legacy for women's progress was the call for common humanity, intelligence and self-control. These are also characteristic of Holtby's reception of Charlotte Brontë and Alfred Adler as explored in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2 is concerned with Holtby's defence of the spinster against Freudian fuelled social opprobrium. Attention to feminine sexuality and sexual types between the wars was heightened by the greater accessibility of Havelock Ellis' sexology and Freud's psychoanalytic theory through popular psychology books and marriage manuals, one of the most successful of which proved to be Marie Stopes' best-selling *Married Love* (1918). Though this led to a greater recognition of the importance of female desire and women's right to sexual liberation, it had its downside for the single woman. Not only were her female friendships eyed with suspicion for possible lesbian undercurrents but her social role as feminist, teacher or politician also fell into disrepute. The celibate woman became a social menace who dammed up her sexual energy with catastrophic results not only for her own mental health but also for society at large. Holtby flatly contested such stereotypes and her fiction is replete with inspirational examples of the single woman or spinster.

Holtby, however, was faced with the difficult task of finding a way to narrate the spinster's life. Women's lives in the realist genre typically follow the marriage plot but in a post-war world, bereft of marriageable young men there could no longer be a conventional happy ending for every woman. Holtby therefore re-writes the happy ending of conventional romance. Rather than looking to the plethora of interwar romance novels that often depicted women as submissive masochists falling for virile brutes, Holtby looked to Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth century novels for a



more challenging romantic precedent. Holtby's spinsters are twentieth century reincarnations of Brontë heroines and through them Holtby strives to write a happy ending for the spinster that prioritises work as well as love. By appealing to her reader's familiarity with Charlotte Brontë, Holtby subverts expectations of romantic union to provoke a questioning attitude to both her novels and their representation of interwar society.

Chapter 3 explores Holtby's representations of mother and son relationships. Recent scholarship on Holtby has focused on her defence of the spinster to the exclusion of her thoughts on motherhood and mother-son relationships, an oversight which is redressed here. Through her consideration of Alfred Adler's psychological concept of the 'inferiority complex', Holtby's fiction points to how the pressure towards maternity between the wars was a symptom of masculine and national 'inferiority complexes'. Holtby's use of Adlerian psychological concepts has gone unrecognised in previous scholarship and offers some important insights for how feminist thought assimilated psychology to an anti-fascist critique in the 1930s. Holtby achieves this by considering the feminist potential in Alfred Adler's theory of Individual Psychology. Adler had dissented from orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis in 1911. His theory of Individual Psychology was founded on feelings of inferiority and the psychological concept of 'inferiority complex' became particularly popular in the interwar period. Its concepts were frequently referred to in the growing numbers of child-care manuals. From the late 1920s, Holtby increasingly turned her attentions to ideas circulating around motherhood and began to connect the interwar anxieties over birth rates with baby boom propaganda, child-care manuals and the fascist veneration of motherhood. Her use of Adler in this critical enterprise serves to demonstrate how women might assume a critical approach to the cultural and political



impetus towards motherhood and use that not only to make themselves better mothers but also better citizens capable of stemming the rising tide of European fascism.

Wollstonecraft, Brontë and Adler all figure in Holtby's feminist thought to express her resistance to the fashion for sexual division set in motion by popularised psychology and encapsulated in fascist rhetoric. On one level, the three chapters can be read as a continuous narrative with Holtby signalling the similarities between Wollstonecraft and Brontë's feminist belief in equality. In this way, Adler's thought marks a twentieth century development in feminist theory; where Freud's is a psychology of sex distinction for Holtby, Adler's is a psychology of equality. Yet the order of the chapters does not signify a chronological progression in Holtby's thoughts, rather all three influences circulate in her work simultaneously. As a result, the chapters are perhaps best viewed as a triptych. Each in its own way is only partial yet the combination of all three chapters opens a window onto Holtby's multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory challenge to the climate of opinion between the wars summed up in Oswald Mosley's call for 'men who are men and women who are women' (Mosley, p.54). This study therefore marks the beginning of a closer look at Holtby's place within a feminist history of ideas and aims to unfold some of the many difficulties facing British interwar feminism in one of the most turbulent periods of European political history.

## Chapter 1

### Mary Wollstonecraft, Anti-Rationalism and Feminist Theory Between the Wars

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#### Introduction

In the early 1930s, Holtby was writing what she called her 'Woman book'.<sup>1</sup> It was published in 1934 with the title *Women and a Changing Civilisation*. Despite her own view of it as 'a good, uninspired hack work', Holtby was pleased to discover that it was well received.<sup>2</sup> The day after the book was published, she noted that the *Daily Sketch* had devoted a whole column to it.<sup>3</sup> She wrote jubilantly to Brittain, exclaiming, 'My Woman book is getting quite good reviews'<sup>4</sup> and 'for a little text book is having a very good press – is part of a series and negotiated for in America by Lane'.<sup>5</sup> Holtby was praised for her wide scope and detailed factual analysis, as one review makes clear:

She possesses the historical mind and she has lived the political life - a somewhat rare combination; hence, this new book of hers is not only a feminist tract. It is a survey of past and a summary of present conditions - political and social, at home and abroad; and as such, its marshalled data and legitimate inference will be of value to more than the advocate of sex equality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Winifred Holtby Collection, Local Studies Library, Hull Central Library, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 14 April 1934, fol. 20.

<sup>2</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 12 October 1934, fol. 20.

<sup>3</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 6 October 1934, fol. 20.

<sup>4</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 12 October 1934, fol. 20.

<sup>5</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 14 November 1934, fol. 20.

<sup>6</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Cicely Hamilton, 'Women as Human Beings', *Everyman*, 18 October 1934, WH/4/4.12/01d.



The appeal of Holtby's 'little text book' lay not only in its feminist survey of women's progress but also in its astute readings of the cultural and political climate between the wars.

As the review above suggests, Holtby's 'Woman book' argues for 'sex equality'. In doing this, it pays homage to another 'Woman book' that had also argued for 'sex equality' over a hundred and fifty years before: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, first published in 1792. As Holtby openly declares:

Mary Wollstonecraft went to the heart of the matter: 'The first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex, and . . . secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.'<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I examine how Mary Wollstonecraft 'went to heart of the matter' from Holtby's feminist perspective and how *A Vindication* shapes Holtby's conception of feminist history in *Women and a Changing Civilisation*.

A number of feminist scholars have observed the echoes between Holtby's thought and that of her eighteenth century predecessor, Mary Wollstonecraft. Rosalind Delmar, for instance, observes that '[t]he "old feminists" (amongst which as we saw in the introduction Holtby included herself in 1926) placed themselves within a long tradition. Mary Wollstonecraft had demanded women's right to be treated as part of humanity rather than being confined within her sex'.<sup>8</sup> Dale Spender also aligns

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<sup>7</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (Chicago: Cassandra Editions, 1978; first pub. London: John Lane, 1934), p.41. Further page references are hereafter denoted as *Women* in the main text. The quote is cited from Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ed. and intro. Miriam Brody (London: Penguin, 1975; repr. 1992; first pub. 1792), p.81-82. Further page references hereafter denoted by *VRW* in the main text.

<sup>8</sup> Rosalind Delmar, 'Afterword' in *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby*, by Vera Brittain (London: Virago, 1980; first pub. 1940), p.443-453 (p.451).



Holtby's feminist thought in a tradition emanating from Wollstonecraft when she remarks, 'Mary Wollstonecraft made her own valuable contribution [. . .] there is only one human species she argued [. . .] This was a rationale that had served the suffragists well in their quest for the vote, and it was one that Winifred Holtby adhered to'.<sup>9</sup> Such observations serve to position Holtby's 'equality' feminism in a tradition of feminist thought that began with Mary Wollstonecraft and both the structure and substance of Holtby's argument in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* would seem to confirm this. Spender even suggests that it was Holtby's identification with Wollstonecraft's aims that spurred her on to differentiate herself from the 'new feminists' or 'woman-centred' feminists in 1926 (Spender, p.102). In my view, however, we should be careful not to railroad either Holtby or Wollstonecraft into a binary conception of feminist history, structured around equality and difference. As this chapter will demonstrate, Holtby revitalises Wollstonecraft's call for women to be afforded a 'character as a human being', not simply to counter feminist and anti-feminist promulgations of sexual division but also as a way to allow concepts of equality and difference to speak to each other.

The first part of this chapter considers why Holtby elects to posit Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as the 'bible of the women's movement' (*Women*, p.41). On one level, this might seem obvious given the parallels between Holtby's call for the erasure of inequalities based on sexual division and Mary Wollstonecraft's call for 'a character as a human being' cited above. Yet there were other possible 'bibles' available to feminists in the early twentieth century; Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour*, first published in 1911 was one. Part 1 of this chapter briefly discusses the reasons behind Holtby's preference for *A Vindication*

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<sup>9</sup> Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London: Pandora, 1984), p.102.



over *Woman and Labour*. In this respect, it offers new insights into Wollstonecraft's reception in interwar feminist thought, an area which has, until recently, been largely overlooked in feminist scholarship.

Holtby's reading of *A Vindication* strongly reflects anxieties in the interwar political climate about the swing against rational individualism and liberal democracy in favour of corporate emotion and fascist dictatorship. In Holtby's history of women's progress, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* symbolises the feminist call for human equality jeopardised by the rise of fascism in the 1930s. Holtby binds Mary Wollstonecraft into a feminist critique of the wider political and cultural trend towards anti-rationalism within interwar Europe, of which fascism is merely one facet. Holtby describes this as 'a revolt against reason' (*Women*, p.158). The second part of this chapter examines how Holtby constructs this critique of the 'revolt against reason' by alluding to *A Vindication*.

The 'revolt against reason' validates instinct over reason and Holtby's framework here recalls Wollstonecraft's analytical framework of reason and passion in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Holtby is conscious that passion has become almost entirely associated with sexual instinct amongst her Freud-obsessed generation. As she remarks in *Women and a Changing Civilisation*:

Since reason and the intellect have fallen into disfavour, the instincts are accounted as of higher importance than the mind. Passion, which Hegel called 'a sort of instinct almost animal, by which man applies his energies to a single cause,' becomes associated almost exclusively with physical desire, and the difference between the sexes is necessarily exaggerated. (*Women*, p.160)

On one level, Holtby's argument in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* encapsulates the broader polemic of her work, pressing for the rational control of instinct in order

to overcome the cultural and political trend towards sexual division. In this respect, Holtby's approach to the newly circulating concepts of instinct in the interwar period might be summed up in a phrase taken from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*: '[l]et reason teach passion' (*VRW*, p.115). Yet Holtby's work expresses ambiguity over whether the distinction between reason and passion, or reason and instinct, can be so clearly demarcated in the interwar climate. Not only this, she seems uncertain whether this distinction can offer feminists any solutions to fascist calls for sex distinction. As she makes clear at the start of *Women and a Changing Civilisation*:

The problems which feminists of the nineteenth century thought to solve along the lines of rationalism, individualism and democracy, present new difficulties in an age of mysticism, community and authority. So that in 1934 the recurrent riddles are repeated; is it an error to demand for men and women equality of opportunity in every field of human action? (*Women*, p.7)

*Women and a Changing Civilisation* therefore asserts the importance of a 'rational philosophy' on a textual level. Yet on a conceptual level, it is much more concerned with exploring how psychology, a discourse that Holtby associates with the 'revolt against reason', might renew Wollstonecraft's call for 'a character as a human being'. This forms the focus of the third part of this chapter, where I compare Holtby's psychological analysis of gender inequalities with other interwar feminist thinkers such as Virginia Woolf and Eleanor Rathbone. The aim here is to consider how Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* influences a turn towards feminist theory following the political activism of the suffragettes.



## Part 1

### **‘The Bible of the Women’s Movement’: Interwar Feminist Receptions of Mary Wollstonecraft**

So far as her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is concerned, it is a bad book, straggling, grandiloquent, uneven; it violated contemporary sentiment, was condemned by contemporary judgment and sank into temporary oblivion after the premature death of its writer. Yet it is a great book; great in its vision, its passion, its independence. After a brief period of neglect, its message suddenly appeared relevant to the nineteenth century. It has been reprinted eighteen times, its latest edition dated 1929, and it has become the bible of the women’s movement in Great Britain.

(*Women*, p.41)

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is Holtby’s choice for ‘the bible of the women’s movement’. Given that Holtby shared Wollstonecraft’s belief in the importance of a common humanity, ‘regardless of the distinction of sex’, there is perhaps nothing surprising in it. Yet, Vera Brittain had used almost the same phrase to describe another influential ‘Woman book’ in feminist history. In 1933, Brittain described Olive Schreiner’s 1911 text, *Woman and Labour*, as the ‘Bible of the Woman’s Movement’.<sup>10</sup> Despite her close friendship with Brittain, it seems Holtby refused to adopt Brittain’s ‘Bible’ for her own. In this section, I address the question of why Holtby elected Wollstonecraft’s rather than Schreiner’s text to be her feminist ‘Bible’ and what this reveals about the interwar feminist reception of Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought.

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<sup>10</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, preface by Shirley Williams (London: Virago, 1999; first pub. Gollancz, 1933), p.41. Further page numbers to this edition are hereafter denoted as *TY* in the main text.

## Olive Schreiner's Legacy of Service and Self-Sacrifice

The arguments for equal opportunities in employment and education raised by Holtby and her feminist colleagues of *Time and Tide* could have been, and probably were, influenced by a much closer feminist predecessor than Mary Wollstonecraft. Olive Schreiner's work had proved inspirational to many feminists of Holtby's generation. Vera Brittain's indebtedness to Schreiner's work, in particular, has been widely observed.<sup>11</sup> Brittain's budding feminist sympathies in her youth became life-long convictions after reading Schreiner's *Woman and Labour*, soon after its publication in 1911. It inspired Brittain to break the mould of the Buxton middle-class woman and invigorated her determination to go to Oxford University, where she met Holtby in 1919. Brittain reaffirms the importance of Schreiner to both her feminism and her subsequent pacifism at various points throughout her oeuvre. The most striking of these occurs at the start of her famous war autobiography, *Testament of Youth*:

To Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* – that 'Bible of the Woman's Movement' which sounded to the world of 1911 as insistent and inspiring as a trumpet-call summoning the faithful to a vital crusade – was due my final acceptance of feminism [. . .] I can still tingle with the excitement of the passage which reinforced me [. . .] in my determination to go to college and at least prepare for a type of life more independent than that of a Buxton young lady:

'We take all labour for our province!' (TY, p.41)

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), pp.54-55 and Deborah Gorham *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.84-94 and pp.176-179.



References to Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* abound in Brittain's work from 1927 to 1955, supporting her declaration of it as the 'Bible of the Women's Movement'.

Alan Bishop, however, through his work on Brittain's war diary (on which *Testament of Youth* was based) has argued that this was not the only text of Schreiner's to prove a 'Bible' for Brittain. He outlines the enormous influence of Schreiner's earlier text *The Story of an African Farm*.<sup>12</sup> Despite its initial reference to *Woman and Labour*, *Testament of Youth* closely follows the published diary, *Chronicle of Youth*, with its constant allusions to Schreiner's characters in *African Farm*. Brittain read *African Farm* after *Woman and Labour*, at the onset of the First World War at the time when she became engaged a young soldier, Roland Leighton, who sent her a copy of Schreiner's first novel in April 1914. As a result, the novel accrued for her a profoundly personal and emotional significance. Brittain identified strongly with Schreiner's 'New Woman' heroine, Lyndall. When Roland is sent to fight at the front, Brittain confides to her diary: '[s]uddenly thinking of Lyndall's desperate prayers – sometimes I feel I *am* her – I knelt on the wet ground, overcome by a fierce appeal for Roland's safety'.<sup>13</sup> Through this process of identification, love, suffering and sacrifice became fused in Brittain's imagination with *African Farm* and national service. After Roland's death, the interpretation of Lyndall that fuels Brittain's imagination becomes a figure quite different from the ambitious young woman of Schreiner's novel. Brittain's empathy with Lyndall's suffering propels her sign up as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse. This is valorised over any other service in the diary because it offers the most hardship and suffering, and represents the

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Bishop, '“With Suffering and Through Time”: Olive Schreiner, Vera Brittain and the Great War' in *Olive Schreiner and After: Essays on South African Literature in Honour of Guy Butler*, ed. Malvern Van Wyk Smith and Don MacLennan (Claremont: David Philip, 1983), pp.80-92, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Vera, Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth: Great War Diary 1913-1917*, ed. Alan Bishop (New York: Phoenix Press, 2000; first pub. Gollancz 1981), p.188.



closest a woman could get to sacrificing herself to the war effort. Brittain's diaries, her autobiography of the war years, *Testament of Youth*, and her first novel, *The Dark Tide* all articulate this highly idiosyncratic and emotional engagement with Olive Schreiner. *The Story of an African Farm* came to symbolise for Brittain suffering and self-sacrifice. This particularly influenced her first novel, *The Dark Tide* (1924) where Brittain's heroine sacrifices a promising writing career to become a nurse. The ending of this novel reverberates with the condition that female independence must be predicated on the renunciation of romantic love and personal glory. In this way, Brittain integrated Schreiner's radical call for women's work with a conservative Victorian concept of self-sacrificing womanhood.

In *Testament of Friendship*, Brittain claims that she was responsible for initiating Holtby into feminism. Given Brittain's own initiation via Schreiner, this raises the question of why Holtby did not share her fellow feminist's belief in Schreiner's work as the 'Bible of the Woman's Movement'. Brittain herself hints at the answer to this question. Describing Holtby's gratitude for introducing her to feminism, Brittain recounts:

her belief in the equality of the sexes was a cool intellectual conviction. To the end, she maintained that the realisation of sex inequality first dawned upon her at Oxford and that I was its source. Her little volume, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, in John Lane's Twentieth Century Library, is dedicated to two veteran advocates of women's rights, but in my personal copy she wrote on the flyleaf: "For Vera, who taught me to be a feminist." [ . . . ] But her own feminist opinions knew no bitterness, since they had not originated in any sense of grievance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby*, afterword by Rosalind Delmar (London: Virago, 1980; first pub. 1940), p.133-34. Further page references hereafter denoted by *TF* in the main text.



Brittain draws a distinction here between her own and Holtby's feminism. The implication is that Brittain's feminism is grounded in an emotional 'grievance'. By contrast, Holtby's feminism remains a 'cool intellectual conviction', premised on 'theoretical acceptance' (*TF*, p.133). Brittain revered Schreiner's work as her 'Bible' because it offered a way of expressing her emotional grievances. This produced her very personal reception of Schreiner into a feminist politics of self-development predicated on suffering and self-sacrifice. Holtby's more 'intellectual' and 'theoretical' approach refused to idealise suffering and self-sacrifice in this way. In many instances, she even questioned and criticised them as feminine and feminist experiences. As a result, Holtby never engaged with either Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* or *African Farm* on the emotional level that Brittain did.

A brief comparison between Holtby's early novels and Brittain's *The Dark Tide* underlines this point. Indeed, this comes through strongly in Holtby's first novel, *Anderby Wold* (1923), which, unlike Brittain's *The Dark Tide*, narrates the tale of a heroine whose personal fulfilment is blighted rather than released by the personal sacrifices she makes to her husband and community.<sup>15</sup> Her second novel, *The Crowded Street* (1924), continues this theme.<sup>16</sup> Here, the middle-class mother demands that her daughter sacrifice her professional ambitions to marriage and social respectability. Holtby's heroine, however, refuses to sacrifice her dreams of a professional career to a second-rate marriage proposal. The novel ends, much like Brittain's, with the heroine contemplating her future as a financially independent woman. The difference, however, is that Holtby's heroine sets out to make the best of her talents as an accountant, whereas Brittain's heroine, a talented writer, martyrs

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<sup>15</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Anderby Wold*, intro. Mary Cadogan (London: Virago, 1981; repr. 1982; first pub. John Lane, 1923).

<sup>16</sup> Winifred Holtby, *The Crowded Street*, intro. Clare Hardisty (London: Virago, 1981; repr. 1987; first pub. John Lane, 1924).



herself to the nursing profession. In her depictions of modern, independent women, Holtby consistently steered away from the element of compromise and self-sacrifice so prevalent in Brittain's fiction. She believed, as she wrote to her mother in 1923, 'that service lies in this – that each of us should use in the highest way, to the very widest possible extent, the abilities or powers they have been given.'<sup>17</sup> In this, we might say that Holtby's feminist perspective was actually closer than Brittain's to what Schreiner had urged in *Woman and Labour*. Holtby's vision of service resonates with Schreiner's insistence that 'in each child we bring to life, not one potentiality shall be lost, nor squandered on a lesser when it might have been expended on a higher and more beneficent task'.<sup>18</sup>

This is not to suggest, however, that Brittain's interpretations of suffering and self-sacrifice were not also present in Schreiner's writing. Indeed, Schreiner seems to have remained a complex site of negotiation for Holtby's conception of the modern woman. There are numerous instances where she seems to define the modern woman of the interwar period using Schreiner's vision of the 'New Woman' in *Woman and Labour*. Yet, she refrains from wholly endorsing it because of its overtones of self-sacrifice. For instance in 1931, Holtby writes:

The older type - characters of active man who wrought and passive woman who suffered, are nowadays sometimes replaced by something new, by women interested in action rather than feeling, by women whose main concern is with impersonal ends, and who use opportunities to secure these. Such women, we instinctively feel, are "modern".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Letters to a Friend*, ed. Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam (Bath: Cedric Chivers, 1971; first pub. 1937), p.369.

<sup>18</sup> Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, preface by Jane Graves (London: Virago, 1978; first pub. T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), p.216. Further page references hereafter denoted by *WL* in the main text.

<sup>19</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, 'These Modern Women', *The Schoolmistress*, 17 Sept 1931, WH/2/2.21/01/04c.



The allusion to ‘impersonal ends’ here is strongly reminiscent of Schreiner in *Woman and Labour*:

It is this consciousness of great impersonal ends, to be brought, even if slowly and imperceptibly, a little nearer by her action, which gives to many a woman strength for renunciation, when she puts from her the lower type of sexual relationship, even if bound up with all the external honour of a legal bond can confer [. . .] which enables her often to accept poverty toil, and sexual isolation [. . .] and the renunciation of motherhood, that crowning beatitude of women’s existence [. . .] in the conviction that, by so doing, she makes more possible a fuller and higher attainment of motherhood and wifehood to the women who will follow her [. . .] It is this abiding consciousness of an end to be attained, reaching beyond her personal life and individual interests, which constitutes the religious element of the Woman’s Movement of our day, and binds with the common bond of an impersonal enthusiasm into one solid body the women of whatsoever race, class, and nation who are struggling after the readjustment of woman to life. (*WL*, p.127-8)

Notably, Holtby defines the modern woman by her ‘impersonal ends’ and not by her ‘renunciation’ of sexual relations and motherhood as we see in Schreiner. This may just be selective memory or misprision on Holtby’s part. Yet, it demonstrates how she selects the elements of Schreiner’s feminism that correspond with her own and leaves the problematic concepts of self-sacrifice behind. It is no accident that Holtby’s most ‘modern woman’ protagonist, Sarah Burton in *South Riding* (1936), a spinster schoolmistress, cherishes her own ‘impersonal hopes’ and ‘disapprove[s] on principle of sacrifice’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Winifred Holtby, *South Riding: An English Landscape* (London: Virago, 1988; repr. 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2000; first pub. Collins & Co, 1936), p.47.



There are a number of reasons why Holtby may have found this emotional level of self-sacrifice problematic. As we saw above, her early novels explore how the feminine heroine must turn away from sacrificing her career to family duty. By the 1930s, Schreiner's vision of the 'New Woman', sacrificing marriage and motherhood for 'impersonal ends' was outdated. As Holtby indicated in a 1928 article for *The Manchester Guardian*, such a vision implied that 'We can't have the best of both worlds', that women cannot have marriage and a career.<sup>21</sup> The choice to combine marriage and career had become even more pressing for interwar feminists with the imposition of marriage bars in teaching and the civil service after the First World War. The political climate of the 1930s might well have also heightened Holtby's rejection of Schreiner's notions of sacrifice. As Holtby observes in 1934, the call to sacrifice was not used by feminists alone but also by racist and anti-feminist groups such as the British Union of Fascists: '[t]he Fascist leaders have at least learned this lesson, that it is not the invitation to prosperity and ease, but the call to sacrifice, labour, pain and effort which wins the finest followers. It has been observed in Catholic converts, Salvation Army recruits, militant suffragettes, Communists, Jacobites, Jingoists and pacifists alike' (TG, p.171).<sup>22</sup> Read in context, Holtby's observations on the modern woman's place in 1930s British society and her relation to British fascism imply that Schreiner's call to 'sacrifice' acquires new difficulties for feminists in the early twentieth century. Holtby, however, never consciously expresses her unease over Schreiner's resonance with fascism. Carolyn Burdett's recent book, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender and Empire*, does, however, support Holtby's unconscious qualms about the

<sup>21</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Fashions and Feminism', in *Women Talking: An Anthology from The Guardian Women's Page, 1922-35~1957-71*, ed. Mary Stott (London: Pandora, 1987), pp.111-14 (p.113).

<sup>22</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Shall I Order a Black Blouse?', *News Chronicle*, 4 May 1934, in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.171-173 (171).



connections between Schreiner's politics of self-sacrifice and fascism. By examining Schreiner's intellectual engagement with the eugenicist, Karl Pearson, Burdett argues that Schreiner critically assimilated eugenic and evolutionary discourses to a feminist demand for women's work, which led her to valorise self-sacrifice as part of her vision for women's progress. Though the emotional and spiritual register of self-sacrifice in *Woman and Labour* was, in Burdett's view, intended to counter Pearson's chauvinist rationalism, it succeeded in resonating with Pearson's late nineteenth century romanticised notions of National Socialism. Pearson, like the fascists of the 1930s, believed that a woman's primary role was as a mother and that the highest form of service to the nation-state lay in self-sacrifice.<sup>23</sup>

Holtby's wariness of the emotional lure of self-sacrifice steers her away from emulating Brittain's emotional engagement with Schreiner. This does not mean, however, that she fails to find any feminist inspiration in Schreiner's work. Rather, where Brittain's Schreiner is concerned with high spiritual emotion and self-sacrifice, Holtby's Schreiner is a thinker who shares Holtby's 'intellectual' and 'theoretical' commitments. Consequently, Holtby is drawn to Schreiner's interrogation of scientific discourses, as her 1926 review of *Man to Man* demonstrates. Here, Holtby attributes the enduring relevance of Schreiner's philosophy in *Man to Man* to Schreiner's critical uptake of evolutionary science:

[I]f the social theory implied in her [Schreiner's] watch-word, 'Bring up Your Rears!' no longer cuts across the complacent philosophy of the 'survival of the fittest' which dominated the great Victorians', then this is partly due to the influence of Olive Schreiner'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender and Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2001) pp.49-77.

<sup>24</sup> Winifred Holtby, ' "Bring Up Your Rears!": "From Man to Man", by Olive Schreiner' in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.199-201 (p.199).

For Holtby *Man to Man* not only indicates Schreiner's critique of Social Darwinism but, more importantly, her sustained influence as a modern thinker:

It was not because Olive Schreiner thought differently, but because she thought for herself, with a compelling urgency of conviction and a fierce intensity of feeling, that she was, and remains, one of the profoundly original thinkers of modern times. ('Bring up Your Rears!', *TG*, p.200)

Schreiner's legacy for Holtby is her profundity and originality of intellectual thought, rather than her emotional and spiritual appeal as it was for Britain.

The question remains, however, as to why, if Holtby's 'intellectual' feminist convictions could find resonance and inspiration from Schreiner's work, she did not name it as her 'Bible of the Woman's Movement' in 1934. Why did Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* supersede it in her account of women's history? The answer lies in Schreiner's close historical proximity to Holtby's feminist generation. Even if only briefly a historical contemporary, Schreiner remained for Holtby a modern feminist thinker. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Schreiner's calls for training and occupations for women are tellingly elided into the advancements made by women in industry and the professions during the First World War and after. In Holtby's view, Schreiner's was a demand for opportunities that took for granted that women's right to human status had been vindicated. For Holtby, the difference between Schreiner and Wollstonecraft therefore lay in their respective demands for opportunities and rights:



By 1911 Olive Schreiner was able to speak for her generation in *Woman and Labour*, as Mary Wollstonecraft a hundred years earlier, had spoken for hers. But Olive Schreiner's plea was not a cry for "rights," it was a demand for opportunities. (*Women*, p.70-71)

Writing under the shadow of European fascism, Holtby is less sure that women can assume their rights as human beings as a given. From her perspective, the apparently stable ground from which Schreiner and her own generation had demanded women's opportunities shifts uncertainly between the wars. As Holtby phrases it, '[a]t this time we are living through one of its recurrent crises' (*Women*, p.5). Attitudes to women's emancipation were suffering a backwards swing in Holtby's view, away from the developing attitude of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, when '[a] new attitude recognised their common humanity as of greater importance than their sexual difference' and '[o]ccupations that were once forbidden were permitted' (*Women*, p.5). Despite women's enfranchisement in 1928, Holtby warns that in a climate of economic depression, fascism and psychological theory, the common humanity that women had taken for granted is now threatened:

The economic slump has reopened the question of women's right to earn. The political doctrine of the corporative state in Italy and Germany has inspired new pronouncements upon the function of the woman citizen. Psychological fashions arouse old controversies about the capacity of the female individual. (*Women*, p.7)

The implication of *Women and a Changing Civilisation* is that feminists must acknowledge the new difficulties posed by the economic, cultural and political upheaval of the interwar decades. To address this effectively, Holtby argues that they must once more secure their rights before demanding further opportunities. Part of her



project in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* is to argue for women's rights in this shifting socio-political climate. She achieves this therefore, not by re-invoking the call for opportunities embodied by Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* but the call for women's rights which preceded it a hundred years before in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*.

### The Interwar Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft

Holtby acclaims Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as the 'bible of the women's movement' because for her it embodies an unequivocal statement of gender equality, arguing for women's right to have 'a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex' (*Women*, p.41). In Holtby's thought, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* encapsulated the argument for women's right to political, economic and social equality. Holtby was not alone in reading Wollstonecraft this way during the interwar period; other feminists involved with the feminist journal *Time and Tide* also seem to have shared this reception of Wollstonecraft and increasingly so under the threat of fascism. Scholars tracking the feminist reception of *A Vindication*, however, have tended to overlook Wollstonecraft's place in feminist thought during the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Barbara Taylor and Cora Kaplan's work has gone some way to rectify this hiatus in feminist scholarship but they concentrate on Woolf's reading of Wollstonecraft. By examining Holtby's approach to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*, this section elaborates on their analysis.

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<sup>25</sup> See Wendy Gunther-Canada "The same subject continued": Two hundred years of Wollstonecraft scholarship' in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Maria J Falco (Pennsylvania; Pennsylvania State University, 1996), *passim*. Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp.136-139. Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), pp.274-279.



Taylor and Kaplan consider Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay on Mary Wollstonecraft as representative of *A Vindication's* early twentieth century reception. Woolf reads Wollstonecraft as a woman full of conflicts and contradictions, of rational politics and high emotion:

The conflict of all these contradictions shows itself in her face, at once so resolute and so dreamy, so sensual and so intelligent, and beautiful into the bargain . . . Every day she made theories by which life should be lived; and every day she came smack against other people's prejudices. Every day too – for she was no pedant, no cold-blooded theorist – something was born in her that thrust aside her theories and forced her to model them afresh.<sup>26</sup>

Taylor finds that Woolf's reading of Wollstonecraft shares aspects of her own, observing that Woolf saw in Wollstonecraft 'characteristics previously regarded as undesirable or irreconcilable in women - political rage, intellectual hubris, emotional vulnerability, eroticism and maternal devotion – [which] came together in a poignant union of reason and passion'.<sup>27</sup> Woolf's essay notably concentrates on Wollstonecraft's life rather than her texts, detailing her time in revolutionary France, her failed love affairs with Fuseli and Imlay and her unconventional domiciliary arrangements with Godwin. According to Kaplan, '[t]his reinstatement of Mary Wollstonecraft's sexual and emotional "experiments" as the most liberating and progressive elements of her thinking spoke to a concern expressed by many women thinkers, especially women novelists, between the world wars'.<sup>28</sup> In Kaplan's argument, this 'concern' is centred on questions of women's affective life. Both

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Mary Wollstonecraft' (1929), *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, intro. Michèle Barrett (London: Women's Press, 1979), pp.96-103 (p.99).

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p.251.

<sup>28</sup> Cora Kaplan, 'Mary Wollstonecraft's Reception and Legacies' in *the Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp.256-269 (p.252).



Taylor and Kaplan alight on Woolf's reception of Mary Wollstonecraft because it correlates with their own projects to rehabilitate Wollstonecraft from her debilitating 'liberal feminist' legacy in the late twentieth century. Both scholars address the controversy within feminist scholarship since the 1960s over whether Wollstonecraft privileges reason over emotion and rationalism over sexuality; both interrogate the latent assumption within much late twentieth feminism that Wollstonecraft was a frigid rationalist. Central to Taylor and Kaplan's re-readings of Wollstonecraft is the need to put feeling back into feminist politics. In her book, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Taylor explores the importance of religious devotion to Wollstonecraft's demands for sexual equality. Taylor insists that Wollstonecraft's faculty of reason must be read according to Enlightenment concepts of the mind, where imagination is revered as the sublime fusion of rational judgement, feeling and fantasy (Taylor, p.58). In Taylor's view, Wollstonecraft's reason is directed by her erotic impulses towards God and is therefore a 'libidinised, imaginative drive toward the True and the Good derived from Rousseau and the Christian-Platonist tradition' (Taylor, p.108). Kaplan's interest in the interwar reception also contributes to a wider argument around the question of 'affect'; she interrogates the possibility of a feminist politics arising from the realms of passion and feeling and opposes simplistic assumptions that only a rational stance generates viable feminist agendas.

Taylor and Kaplan's focus on Woolf certainly opens up alternative feminist readings of Wollstonecraft that perceive her life and thought as a complement of reason and passion, rather than the dominance of reason over passion. Yet this focus also diverts their attention from perhaps less radical though more politically charged readings of Wollstonecraft in the interwar period. Holtby's understanding of Wollstonecraft does not illustrate the complementarity between reason and passion in



Wollstonecraft's thought so completely as Woolf, though there are some similarities. More important to Holtby is Wollstonecraft's message of common humanity, which she voices afresh in the interwar context amidst political and economic pressures pushing women back into the home.

Holtby's reading of Mary Wollstonecraft in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* initially shares Woolf's preoccupations with biography rather than text. For instance, Holtby also alludes to Wollstonecraft's torrid love life as her 'genius for indiscretion', detailing Wollstonecraft's defiance of paternal and fraternal authority, her travels to revolutionary France, her love affair with Imlay, her illegitimate child, her suicide attempt and her unconventional marriage with Godwin. Just as Woolf describes Wollstonecraft as 'no cold-blooded theorist' (Woolf, p.99), Holtby too depicts her as a passionate woman: '[r]eckless in her affections as in her opinions, she outraged what was perhaps the strongest passion among women of her time – the passion for propriety' (*Women*, p.42). For Holtby, Wollstonecraft's rebellious breach of propriety is comparable with the suffragettes' campaign: 'her rebellion had something of the liberating effect of the militant suffragette movement which, over a hundred years later, was to violate that sentiment of propriety' (*Women*, p.42). On this level, Holtby corroborates Kaplan's suggestion that Wollstonecraft appealed to early twentieth century feminism because of her unconventional personal life and passionate devotion to political change.

This is, however, where the comparison between Woolf's and Holtby's reception diverges. In her consideration of Wollstonecraft's legacies, Kaplan suggests that early twentieth century receptions of Wollstonecraft - like Woolf's and also the international anarchist, Emma Goldman - stressed the radical nature of Wollstonecraft's life rather than her texts. Taking her polemical demands for political



education and economic equality for granted, 'Goldman and Woolf used Wollstonecraft to validate the importance of women's affective life rather than women's equal civil status' (Kaplan, p.251). Holtby uses Wollstonecraft in precisely the opposite way to Kaplan's reading. For her, Wollstonecraft is still crucial to validating 'women's equal civil status'. As such, Holtby's appeal to Wollstonecraft not only acknowledges her rebellious life but also quotes directly from the text of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and uses this text to symbolise the necessity of rearticulating Wollstonecraft's demands for equal rights and common humanity anew in the interwar context. *A Vindication* is Holtby's 'bible of the women's movement', not because it affirms the importance of women's emotional lives, but because it symbolises the 'touchstone' of the feminist belief in women's equal rights and common humanity (*Women*, p.41).

Holtby's deployment of Wollstonecraft to underline the importance of 'women's equal civil status' was not an isolated reading; other feminists also understood Wollstonecraft's call for 'a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex' to be relevant to the interwar context in this way. The successful reception of Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* in the 1930s confirms that other like-minded egalitarian feminists also recognised the importance of Mary Wollstonecraft to their feminist heritage. Lady Margaret Rhondda, founder and editor of the liberal feminist journal *Time and Tide*, described *Women and a Changing Civilisation* as 'the best thing of its kind written since the war'.<sup>29</sup> Another contributor to *Time and Tide*, the veteran equality feminist and ex-suffragette, Cicely Hamilton, commented specifically on the timeliness of Holtby's invocation of Wollstonecraft in 1934:

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<sup>29</sup> Viscountess Rhondda, 'Winifred Holtby', *Sunday Times*, 30 September 1935, p.20.



[T]he end and true motive of what used to be known as the “Women’s Movement” is “to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.” Those words of Mary Wollstonecraft, are they not written in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published near a century ago? And is it not testimony to the slowness of real and assured advance that Winifred Holtby, in 1934, must quote them and insist on their veracity?<sup>30</sup>

Hamilton valued Holtby’s reiteration of Wollstonecraft’s seminal principles of equal rights in the 1930s’ social, economic and political climate. Having travelled across 1930s’ Europe and written about Fascist Italy, Hamilton was well aware of the need to stress women’s rights as human beings under the shadow of European fascism. Holtby’s friend and *Time and Tide* colleague, Vera Brittain, was also aware of Wollstonecraft’s pertinence to the 1930s political climate. So inspired was Brittain by Wollstonecraft’s life that she wrote excitedly to Holtby in 1935, outlining her plans for a biographical novel:

I had what I think may ultimately be a marvellous idea for a historical-biographical novel - the story of England at the time of the outbreak of the French Revolution (when everything was starting that we are now fighting to save - democracy, feminism, religion and reaction?, birth control (Malthus) ) - with Mary Wollstonecraft as heroine.<sup>31</sup>

Brittain supports Holtby’s implication in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* that women could no longer take equal rights for granted and had to fight for them once more. Brittain worked on this biography of Wollstonecraft during the mid thirties but

<sup>30</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Cicely Hamilton, ‘Women as Human Beings’, *Everyman*, 18 October 1934, WH/4/4.12/01d.

<sup>31</sup> The Winifred Holtby Archive, Vera Brittain Letters to Winifred Holtby, April 14 1935, fol. 26.



despite Holtby's reassurance that '[t]he Mary Wollstonecraft idea is perfectly *grand*'<sup>32</sup> and interest from publishers, the book was never published.<sup>33</sup> It did however become part of Brittain's 1950 history of the women's movement, entitled *Lady into Woman*.<sup>34</sup>

Margaret Rhondda, Cicely Hamilton and Vera Brittain were all involved with the feminist journal, *Time and Tide*, which despite presenting itself as a forum for debate between different feminist ideas and between feminist and anti-feminist viewpoints, remained largely committed to the concept of sexual equality. In particular, many of the feminist thinkers connected with *Time and Tide* continued to demand equal opportunities for women in employment and education, regardless of calls for sexual division. In a pamphlet published in 1927 by the Six Point Group, the active egalitarian feminist organisation associated with *Time and Tide*, Vera Brittain defines the group's feminist position according to Enlightenment concepts of natural rights and the human being. Countering anti-feminist complaints about the *démodé* nature of feminism post-war, she affirms that '[f]eminism still lives in England today because the incompleteness of the English franchise represents but one symbol among others of the incomplete recognition of women as human beings'.<sup>35</sup> Brittain concludes the pamphlet with the exhortation: 'Recognise our full humanity, and we will trouble you no more' ('Why Feminism Lives', *TG*, p.99). Other contributors to *Time and Tide* also referred to this equal rights concept of the 'human being' in order to decry inequalities in women's education. One article complains about the 'aesthetic and

<sup>32</sup> The Winifred Holtby Archive, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 12 April 1935, fol. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Vera Brittain, *Diary of the Thirties, 1932-1939: Chronicle of Friendship* ed. Alan Bishop (London: Gollancz, 1986), p.327; p.419.

<sup>34</sup> Vera Brittain, *Lady into Woman: A History of Women from Victoria to Elizabeth II* (London: Andrew Dakers Ltd, 1953), p.215.

<sup>35</sup> Vera Brittain, 'Why Feminism Lives' in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985; repr. 1985), pp.97-99 (p.98). Further page references to this volume hereafter denoted by *TG* in the main text.



domestic' curriculum recommended for girls by one headmaster of Harrow, arguing that 'there can be nothing more dangerous to the whole structure of society than this attempt of the reactionaries to train women from their earliest years for a subordinate position and to divide the community into two groups: human beings and females'.<sup>36</sup> Even Lady Margaret Rhondda's opening editorial for the very first issue of *Time and Tide* in 1920 makes it clear that the journal was committed to a concept of equal citizenship rooted in the common humanity of the sexes:

There is another need in our press of which the average person of today is conscious, but which must specially weigh with women - the lack of a paper which shall treat men and women as equally part of the great human family, working side by side ultimately for the same great objects by ways equally valuable, equally interesting; a paper which is in fact concerned neither specially with men nor specially with women, but with human beings.<sup>37</sup>

Holtby's reiteration of Wollstonecraft's call for women to be recognised as 'human beings, regardless of the distinction of sex' was therefore in keeping with the feminist networks in which she worked during the 1920s and 1930s. *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, however, makes it clear that interwar feminism owed its battle cry for common humanity to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* and that this 'bible of the women's movement' (*Women*, p.41) still had much to say to the shifting political climate between the wars.

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<sup>36</sup> Anon., 'Human Beings - and Females', 3 February 1928 in Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London: Pandora, 1984), pp.233-236 (p.236).

<sup>37</sup> Lady Rhondda, 'Editorial', *Time and Tide*, 14 May 1920 in Dale Spender *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London: Pandora, 1984), pp.6-8 (pp.7-8).



## Part 2

### **‘The Revolt Against Reason’: *A Vindication* and Anti-rationalism Between the Wars**

In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby remarks that *A Vindication* has ‘been reprinted over eighteen times, its latest edition dated 1929’ (*Women*, p.41). Holtby’s understanding of *A Vindication* and the manner with which she integrates it into her historical account of women’s progress is heavily indebted to the ideological reception of this latest 1929 edition in *Time and Tide*. Vera Brittain’s husband, the political scientist and sociologist, George Catlin, was responsible for writing the preface to this 1929 edition and discussed his ideas on Wollstonecraft’s relevance to the political and ideological ferment between the wars in his correspondence with Holtby. The *Time and Tide* review of Catlin’s 1929 preface clearly indicated how *A Vindication* could speak to the interwar political climate. Here Catlin’s preface to *A Vindication* was compared with Merick Booth’s *Woman and Society*, a historical account of women’s social and cultural function that strongly urged for sexual division. According to the reviewer, Booth argued that feminism produced masculinism in women and was therefore detrimental to their health. The *Time and Tide* review binds Booth’s anti-feminism into a broader political fashion for anti-rationalism and sets up Catlin’s preface to *A Vindication* as the antidote:

His main thesis is that to which we are becoming accustomed among the anti-rationalist school, of which Spengler and Keyserling are the philosophers, Jung and Liebman the psychologists, D. H. Lawrence the poet and mystic, Mr Ludovici and Professor Wieth Knudsen among the sociologists. [. . .]

No better antidote to Dr. Booth’s meandering and formless confusion could be found than Professor Catlin’s concise and intelligent introduction to the New Everyman Library



Edition of the two Gospels of feminism with which the author of *Woman and Society* finds such fault. Professor Catlin sees clearly that

“the opposition to the main contentions of the *Vindication* and of the *Subjection of Women* does not now come from political conservatism. It comes from a doctrine newer and more revolutionary than itself, which finds expression in the writings of Ellen Key and in the denunciation of feminist individualism by the Fascists as one of the errors of liberal ideology.”<sup>38</sup>

Though this review is anonymous, the style and polemic suggest that either Holtby or perhaps Catlin's wife, Vera Brittain, could have written it. In any case, what we see here is the argument of Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* in embryo. The ‘anti-rationalist school’ is juxtaposed against Wollstonecraft's ‘main contentions’ in *A Vindication*. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby was to dub this anti-rationalist movement ‘a revolt against reason’ and stress that ‘[t]he enemies of reason are inevitably the opponents of “equal rights”’ (*Women*, p,158).

It is important to note that though Catlin's preface is to a joint edition of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* and J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* lays particular emphasis on Wollstonecraft's opposition to anti-rationalism. In this way, she follows the emphasis laid upon Wollstonecraft, rather than Mill, in the *Time and Tide* review, which quotes Catlin's perspective on the enduring relevance of Mary Wollstonecraft to the twentieth century:

There is a natural “right” as Mary Wollstonecraft argued, which the individual owes himself or herself. It is a right which is also a duty imposed by civilisation [. . .] It is a

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<sup>38</sup> Anon., ‘Human Beings and Society, *Time and Tide*, 5 April 1929, p.400.



right and obligation to appropriate and to make part of ourselves the best which the civilisation of one's time affords, and this involves procuring the means to know what the best may be . . . Feminism properly understood does not consist in an assertion of the true abstract equality of all women with all men, but it does insist that each human being shall find his or her level apart from pre-determined status.<sup>39</sup>

Catlin's understanding of feminism follows Holtby's belief that women should be allowed equal opportunities in education and unemployment regardless of sexual division. He reads Wollstonecraft as underlining the importance of the 'human being' and the right for each human being to develop according to her or his own merit rather than social custom. This liberal philosophy, inspired by Wollstonecraft, is echoed by Holtby at the end of *Women and a Changing Civilisation* when she envisages a world in which '[w]e might allow individual ability rather than social tradition to determine what vocation each member of our community should follow' (*Women*, p.192). Holtby's emphasis on Wollstonecraft, rather than Mill, reinforces the sense that women's progress has a long history, stretching back to the eighteenth century and that the 'revolt against reason' is also a 'revolt' against Wollstonecraft's concept of human equality. This enables Holtby to metaphorically depict history as a pendulum, swinging between Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* and anti-rationalism.

### The Swinging Pendulum

In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby pivots the passage of history around Wollstonecraft's demand that women be recognised as 'human beings, regardless of sex distinction' (cited in *Women*, p.41). As Holtby observes:

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<sup>39</sup> Anon., 'Human Beings and Society, *Time and Tide*, 5 April 1929, p.400.



the position of women in the civilised world has changed in almost every particular. Its curious contradictions to-day are largely due to the clash between Mary Wollstonecraft's ideal of humanity and the sub-human functional ideas of its opponents before and after her. (*Women*, pp.42-3)

Wollstonecraft's 'ideal of humanity' therefore becomes a way for Holtby to mark how progress is swinging back on itself. She therefore metaphorically depicts women's progress through history from ancient times to the 1930s as a swinging pendulum: 'The pendulum is swinging backwards, not only against feminism, but against democracy, liberty and reason, against international co-operation and political tolerance' (*Women*, p.151). This metaphor complicates the idea of historical progress and surfaces frequently in Holtby's journalism during the 1930s. It encapsulates Holtby's impression of history as an oscillation between progress and regression, where Wollstonecraft's 'ideal of humanity' represents progress and the drive towards sexual division becomes regressive.

The very structure of Holtby's argument in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* locates Wollstonecraft at its centre. The first two chapters build up to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* and are significantly entitled 'Hardly Human' and 'The Vindication of Humanity'. An account of Wollstonecraft prefaces the start of the second chapter and this signals the historical recognition of women as equal human beings. The third and fourth chapters loop back, revealing those whom Holtby regards as the interwar proponents of sexual division. Amongst these are Sigmund Freud, D. H. Lawrence and Oswald Mosley and the structure of Holtby's argument suggests they are the reincarnations of ancient religious patriarchs. Fascism and Freudian psychoanalysis are allied with the pre-Wollstonecraft era because of their veneration of sex distinction. Holtby offers an anthropological explanation for this, rooting it in



what she regards as a primeval masculine fear of woman's different bodily experiences, such as 'periodicity, so much more evident in females than in males, pregnancy, child-birth and lactation' (*Women*, p.10). In her view, the interwar push towards sexual division looks backward and perpetuates old patriarchal traditions where '[w]oman remains a "mystery", man an inscrutable "power"' (*Women*, p.162).

The initial effect of this polemical structure is to suggest that women have a history as equal human beings spanning the hundred and fifty years since Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*. Holtby's second chapter, 'The Vindication of Humanity' is therefore sub-divided into sections entitled, the 'Vindication of Citizenship', the 'Vindication of Intelligence', the 'Vindication of Personality', 'The Right to Work' and 'The Right to Property'. Each of these sub-chapters documents the numerous advances made by women, including: the suffrage campaigns leading to universal enfranchisement in 1928; expanded educational opportunities at secondary and university level; reforms in sexual morality allowing for advances in divorce law, maternity and contraception; increased economic independence through greater employment opportunities; and, finally, access to welfare, health insurance and property rights in marriage. All of this historical detail serves to stress the progress already made by women politically, legally, economically and socially in realising Wollstonecraft's 'ideal of humanity'. At the close of this chapter, Holtby makes it clear that women have been struggling for parity with men for over a century and a half and that the upheaval and discontent following the First World War, often termed the 'sex war', is simply the symptom of this continuing struggle. She reassures her readers, '[t]o-day we live in an age of transition' (*Women*, p.96). Yet, there is uneasiness in Holtby's tone; women have come so far but she seems hesitant to affirm that this progress will continue. The direction of this 'transition' seems unpredictable.



By configuring history as a swinging pendulum, Holtby succeeds in establishing Mary Wollstonecraft near the beginning of a hundred and fifty year long swing towards sexual equality and stresses that the interwar period now witnessed a backward swing against this progress. This account of historical progress draws parallels between Wollstonecraft's 1790s context and Holtby's own 1930s political climate. In a 1933 article for the feminist education journal, *The Schoolmistress*, Holtby compared the inequalities and sexual division in the interwar education system to the political context in which Mary Wollstonecraft protested in the 1790s. Wollstonecraft's debate with Talleyrand and Rousseau over the right for women to be educated, such that they might govern themselves and participate in public life as equal citizens, is brought into dialogue here with the growth of fascism and anti-feminism:

To educate one set of persons in order that they may prove useful to another set of persons - that is a scholastic ideal held to only by worthies of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries [. . .] It is by no means extinct to-day among all writers upon women's education. In Germany, in Italy, in parts of the Irish Free State, we can find it accepted with complacency [. . .] There is even a specious fascination about it, which has won over large sections of German opinion, where woman ought to know better, but have been tempted from commonsense by a dream of "corporate solidarity" and a "rhythm of life" in which women, displaying the womanly virtues, exercise an ancillary rôle in the great organism of the race.

...It is curious how attractive old conditions sometimes seem when they are represented to us as new conditions [. . .] But conditions are better than they were when Mary Wollstonecraft protested against the 'Circassian slave' ideal of female education.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, 'Warning From Yesterday', *The Schoolmistress*, 19 October 1933, WH/2/2.21/02/1b.



Though Holtby acknowledges that progress has been made for women in educational opportunities since Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication* in 1792, her tone is ominous. Despite their education, women seem ‘tempted from common-sense’ into a ‘specious fascination’, seduced by fascist visions of emotional unity in the corporate state. Further, Holtby observes that there are still many private finishing schools where ‘Rousseau’s notion of feminine accomplishment casts its undefined shadow over the curriculum’ and girls are prohibited from learning maths in favour of needlework and cookery.<sup>41</sup> Wollstonecraft’s appeal for both sexes to be educated equally still remains to be accomplished and Holtby indicates that the dark cloud of fascism – ‘in Germany, in Italy’ - looms on the horizon to jeopardise what progress has already been achieved. A second article for *The Schoolmistress* in the same year underlines Holtby’s anxieties about the future of women’s progress and the security of their status as human beings in 1930s Europe. In ‘The Right to Serve’, Holtby reviews Friedrich Sieburg’s pro-Nazi treatise, *Germany, My Country*, offering up the disturbing quote from Sieburg for her reader’s consideration: ‘A woman who tries to be ‘human’ as well as womanly gives an impression that her womanliness is inadequate.’<sup>42</sup> Holtby’s thoughts in the early 1930s were increasingly turning to the threat posed by fascism to women’s status as human beings. Her consideration of Wollstonecraft’s repudiation of Rousseau in the 1790s opens her eyes to the fact that history was repeating itself and heightens her anxieties about the rise of fascism. ‘Human history’, she informs her readers ‘may always be a warning when it cannot provide an inspiration’.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, ‘Warning From Yesterday’, *The Schoolmistress*, 19 October 1933, WH/2/2.21/02/1b.

<sup>42</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, ‘The Right To Serve’, *The Schoolmistress*, 30 November 1933, WH/2/2.21/02/11c.

<sup>43</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, ‘A Warning from Yesterday’ *The Schoolmistress*, 19 October 1933, WH/2/2.21/02/1b.



Holtby's articles for *The Schoolmistress* indicate a strong awareness of the specific historical and political moment from which *A Vindication* emerged. Recent scholarship on Wollstonecraft has also sought to revitalise her thought through this approach. For instance, Kelly argues that *A Vindication* responded to a specific historical moment when Talleyrand reported to the French National Assembly in 1791. Wollstonecraft responds to Talleyrand's call to reform public school education for boys and merely direct girls to domestic duties. Kelly contextualises Wollstonecraft's thought and writing by considering it in dialogue with Edmund Burke's sentimental social vision, as well as Tom Paine and the 1789 French declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.<sup>44</sup> Wollstonecraft took the tenets of liberal philosophy and applied them to women, arguing that women should also be permitted to develop their rational faculties. To achieve this, Wollstonecraft deployed her own powers of reason and rational argument against those like Burke and Rousseau whom she associated with prejudicial feelings of sentiment and passion. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby gestures once again to Wollstonecraft's position within eighteenth century debates on women's education, noting that 'she dedicated her protest to Talleyrand' (*Women*, p.41).

*Women and a Changing Civilisation* therefore develops the comparisons between the socio-political context of *A Vindication* and Holtby's own time, begun in the 1933 article 'Warning from Yesterday', to suggest that Wollstonecraft's 'ideal of humanity' can serve as a warning against reactionary historical forces. Where Wollstonecraft debated primarily with Rousseau and Talleyrand against education inequalities between the sexes, Holtby debates with her 1930s equivalents to Rousseau and Talleyrand, primarily Freud, D. H. Lawrence and Oswald Mosley.

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<sup>44</sup> Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p.107.



*Women and a Changing Civilisation* develops the connections made between the 1790s and the 1930s begun in 'Warning from Yesterday' by reading the interwar scene and its trends towards anti-rationalism as 'a revolt against reason'.

### **Instinct and 'a revolt against reason'**

In a sub-chapter of *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, entitled, 'The Intellectuals Despair of Reason', Holtby brings together a number of disparate elements in early twentieth century culture, including Freud and Lawrence, to argue that a shared dismissal of reason has culminated in the growth of fascism:

Events in contemporary Germany would be less important did they not march with fashionable and world-wide theory [. . .] the inarticulate apologists for National Socialism strike a note which had already become familiar to America and Europe.

The insistence on racial solidarity, instinctive unity, 'blood thought' and intuitive functionalism preached to-day from Munich to Posen is only one expression of a revolt against reason which has affected the intellectual life of the entire Western World. It has been traced to a dozen different sources – to a resurgence of the subconscious intuitive self from long suppression, to the publication of Pascal's *Pensées* or Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, to the psychology of Freud and the art of D. H. Lawrence, to the Expressionists, to the Nudists, to the scientists, to the war. But whatever its cause, there is little doubt that a mistrust of the intellect has been let loose in the world, and especially among the intellectuals. (*Women*, pp.158-9)

Fascism is described here as 'the insistence on racial solidarity, instinctive unity and "blood thought"' and is only one part of the 'revolt against reason' identified by Holtby. *Women and a Changing Civilisation* argues that Freud, D. H. Lawrence and Mosley are all part of a broader movement that militates against not only reason but



also women's emancipation and democracy in favour of nationalism and dictatorship. In such a climate, Holtby fears that sexual division will dominate over common humanity, that women 'will be cut off from a hundred fields of action [. . .] separated from their friends and lovers by a gulf of sexual difference' (*Women*, p.162).

The fascist espousal of blood and earth to bind the nation leaves women excluded from public life: 'The blood-brotherhood leaves them outside,' remarks Holtby 'quiescent, passive, waiting to refresh the tired warrior' (*Women*, p.161). According to Holtby there was no place for women in the 'blood thought' that drove the fascist corporate state and she argued that Lawrence had paved the way for the appeal of 'blood thought' in Britain. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, he is described as 'the self-appointed poet and prophet of the movement' (*Women*, p.159). Elsewhere in her 1930s work, Holtby takes issue with Lawrence's idealisation of 'blood thought' and instinctive primitivism. In 1935 for instance, she remarks

The world is being swayed today by a storm of irrationalism. Unchecked passion and instincts, surrender to corporate emotion, 'thinking with blood' [. . .] There is no doubt that the powerful genius of D. H. Lawrence has contributed to that reaction against reason and inquiry and the conscious intellect.<sup>45</sup>

Certainly, Lawrence had made the connections between sex distinction and 'blood thought' as early as 1922 in his *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. Here he claimed that '[t]he blood-conscious and the blood-passion is the very source and origin of us'<sup>46</sup> and that the act of sex constituted 'a polarization of the individual blood in man towards the individual blood in woman' (*Fantasia*, p.275). The point of existence, as

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<sup>45</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Lawrence's Wife', *News Chronicle*, Feb 4 1935, p.4.

<sup>46</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, (New York: Seletzer, 1922), p.271. Further page references are noted in the main text by *Fantasia*.



Lawrence lays it out here, is for man to be renewed by his communion with the 'blood conscious' in the act of coition and for him to venture outwards and collaborate with other men in making a new world. Woman's role was simply to await his return. In *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, this was the key to ensuring 'pure maleness in a man, pure femaleness in a woman' (*Fantasia*, p.279).

Demands for a socio-political division of the sexes arise from a belief in instinct over reason according to Holtby. In her view, both D. H. Lawrence and fascist leaders like Oswald Mosley argued for a society organised according to 'instinct':

*We want men who are men and women who are women'. The italics are Sir Oswald's; they are, I think, important. They illustrate that emphasis upon sexual difference characteristic of a creed which places instinct above reason. (Women, p.161)*

Instinct becomes in Holtby's thought Freud's ambiguous legacy to twentieth century politics, promising progress and liberation on one hand and pointing to the regressive dictatorship and functionalism of the corporate state with the other. She charges both Freud and D. H. Lawrence with inciting the overthrow of sovereign reason in the public imagination:

The twentieth century having dethroned human reason set up the nerves and memory in its place. Freudian psychology has sanctioned the extreme veneration of sex. The followers of D. H. Lawrence have taught us to venerate instinct, emotion, and the intuitive vitality of the senses[.] (*Women*, p.131-132)

Where Wollstonecraft railed against the predominance of feeling without rational understanding, Holtby reveals that feeling in the twentieth century has become a



mutable category. For her generation, it encompasses sentiment, sensibility and passion as in Wollstonecraft's day and now also intuition and 'instinct', as valorised by the Freudian discovery of the unconscious. Fascist states follow this belief in instinct and Holtby observes that as a result 'women have been cast, in the functional state, for the roles of wives, mothers, expectant and desirous mistresses. The whole force of the Freudian revelation, the "modern" morality and the fashionable insistence on the nerves, lies behind that choice' (*Women*, p.161).

Holtby's reading of interwar culture through the framework of reason and anti-rationalism implicates Freud and Lawrence in the gathering momentum towards the ultimate endorsement of sexual division embodied by the fascist state, a world where all men were ultimately 'warriors' and all women wives and mothers. From a modern perspective, however, as Julie Gottlieb has observed, Holtby's reading appears incongruous. Freud emigrated to escape Nazi persecution and his books were burnt under Nazi occupation. D. H. Lawrence, though he had some proto-fascist sympathies, was derided as a debauched novelist by the British Union of Fascists and castigated like Freud for placing too much emphasis on sex.<sup>47</sup> Lawrence himself despised Freudian psychoanalysis for putting sex too much in the head<sup>48</sup>; *Fantasia of the Unconscious* was in fact a diatribe written against Freud to differentiate Lawrence's own perspective on sex and psychology.

Despite all this, however, it was clear that other feminists of Holtby's era shared her reading of the interwar political climate. They also articulated this through

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<sup>47</sup> Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement 1923-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p.118.

<sup>48</sup> Fiona Becket argues that Lawrence developed a spatial critique of Freud. By locating the unconscious and the conscious in the head, Freud confused the sexual and the mental according to Lawrence. See Fiona Becket, 'Lawrence and Psychoanalysis' in *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Anne Fernihough (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p.220. Linda Ruth Williams has highlighted how Lawrence's objections to 'sex in the head' led him to blame women for the spread of an effeminate mass culture of romance and cinema. See Linda Ruth Williams, *Sex in the Head: Visions of Femininity and Film in D. H. Lawrence* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp.8-7.



the framework of reason and passion. Gill Plain notes that both Naomi Mitchison and Virginia Woolf also observed the pernicious ‘unreason’ and irrationalism in patriarchy and the fascist corporate state.<sup>49</sup> In addition, Storm Jameson, a *Time and Tide* colleague of Holtby’s, writes a short essay entitled ‘The Twilight of Reason’ in 1934. Her essay also challenges the interwar fascination with instinct and its distrust of the intellect. Like Holtby, she too describes this in terms of the overthrow of reason:

But in fact, fascism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany are marks of a spread of disrespect for reason which certainly did not begin with them. The philosophy of Bergson, the novels of D. H. Lawrence, the infection of every country by jazz, are all in their different degree symptoms of this disrespect and furtherers of it. Since the century opened, we have seen pass into popular speech any number of phrases to express an almost religious belief, garbled and distorted from its true origins in the supremacy and rightness of purely emotional activity. “Repression is bad for you”.<sup>50</sup>

Storm Jameson’s reading highlights the same interconnections between Freud, D. H. Lawrence, and fascism that we see in Holtby’s *Women and a Changing Civilisation*. Jameson also identifies ‘a revolt against reason’ in the interwar decades and forecasts that it will lead to another world war (Jameson, p.12). In ‘The Twilight of Reason’, fascism embodies a doctrine of ‘militant unreason’ where ‘[w]ar [. . .] the last triumph of the irrational, is accepted by Fascists as the highest activity of the human spirit’ (Jameson, p.16).

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<sup>49</sup> Gill Plain, *Women’s Fiction of the Second World War: Gender Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.153.

<sup>50</sup> Storm Jameson, ‘The Twilight of Reason’ in *Challenge To Death* By Philip Noel Baker Et Al, (London: Constable And Co, 1934), pp.8-9.



Jameson therefore shares Holtby's reading of interwar culture and politics as 'a revolt against reason' (Jameson, p.12). Yet, Jameson's essay does not allude to Mary Wollstonecraft; this, it would seem, is something that only Holtby pursues at length. Contrary to Kaplan's reading of Wollstonecraft's legacy in the interwar period via Woolf, we can see that through Holtby and to some extent through Jameson, Wollstonecraft's ideals of reason and 'common humanity' still played a major role in feminist arguments for civil parity, especially under the shadow of fascism. In Holtby's thought, this is evident in her continued insistence on Wollstonecraft's 'ideal of humanity' as a marker of women's progress and in her use of concepts of reason and anti-rationalism to analyse women's position in shifting political trends.

Holtby's decision to elucidate the competing discourses around fascism and democracy, sexual equality and sexual division according to the framework of reason and anti-rationalism recalls Mary Wollstonecraft's analysis of her 1790s context in terms of 'reason' and 'feeling'. As Cora Kaplan has pointed out, '[i]t was Mary Wollstonecraft who first offered women this fateful choice between the opposed and moral bastions of reason and feeling, which continues to determine much feminist thinking'.<sup>51</sup> The separation of reason from emotion, feeling, instinct and intuition serves to identify broad cultural and political trends against women's emancipation and towards sexual division, fascism and war. It fails, however, to offer either Holtby or Jameson any solutions. In 'The Twilight of Reason', Jameson hints at why this might be the case, cautioning that 'the revolt against reason has been able to make use of the energy of reason to help it' (Jameson, p.12). The very distinction between reason and the 'revolt against reason' is difficult to negotiate and undermines the capacity to counter it through a rational approach. By the end of *Women and a*

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<sup>51</sup> Cora Kaplan, 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism', in *Seachanges: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp.147-176 (p. 155).



*Changing Civilisation*, Holtby still remains adamant that '[w]e must refuse to throw reason overboard' (*Women*, p.189) and asserts

The first requisite would seem to be a rational philosophy of life. This is not as remote and high falutin' a statement as it may appear. So long as we permit our nerves and instincts and traditions to over-ride our brains, our wills and our judgments, we shall be afraid to practise the disciplined experimentalism which the transition to equality demands. (*Women*, p.188)

In Holtby's 'rational philosophy', however, the distance between the 'bastions of reason and feeling' is less than might be supposed. Her 'rational philosophy' is more concerned with undermining 'nerves, instincts and traditions' than asserting its grounding in Locke's liberal philosophy of reason and human rights. The 'revolt against reason' had utilised the rational philosophies of those like Hegel as its intellectual scaffolding, as Jameson point out (Jameson, p.14). Holtby suggests that her 'rational philosophy' might similarly draw energy from the 'revolt against reason' and adapt its psychological basis to an analysis of the 'instinctive fears' underlying civil inequalities (*Women*, p.188). The following section therefore examines how Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* contributes to the psychological turn in feminist theory between the wars.



### Part 3

#### Mary Wollstonecraft and 'Psychological Revolution'

Nothing short of a psychological revolution was needed to achieve that change for which Mary Wollstonecraft laboured – 'to obtain a character as a human being' (*Women*, p.42).

One of the ways in which Holtby combats the dominance of Freudian discourses, so foundational in her view to the 'revolt against reason', is to construct a psychological perspective centred on recognising 'common humanity' rather than sex distinction. Mary Wollstonecraft proves an important inspiration for this endeavour. As we can see from the epigraph to this section, Holtby connected Mary Wollstonecraft with motivating a 'psychological revolution' of her own. In the very act of writing, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby seems conscious that she can express her feminist views on history in this way precisely because of the revolutionary thought of women like Mary Wollstonecraft before her. Holtby is aware that her own beliefs in human equality are influenced by the privileges of education, social and economic freedoms made possible by a former 'psychological revolution'. The structure of *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, however, implies that Wollstonecraft's 'psychological revolution' of human equality, premised on rational thought and natural rights philosophy, is now threatened by a different kind of 'psychological revolution', that of Freud's theory of 'instinct' which fuels the diverse 'revolt against reason'.

The quotation from *A Vindication* and the allusion to Wollstonecraft's influential work in the structure of *Women and a Changing Civilisation* succeeds in



establishing Holtby's 'Woman book' within a tradition of feminist analysis.<sup>52</sup> In her historical account, *English Feminism, 1780-1980*, Barbara Caine reads Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* as part of a tradition of feminist theory originating in *A Vindication* and continued in the nineteenth century by Mill's *On the Subjection of Women*. Like Delmar and Spender, discussed at the start of this chapter, she reads Holtby as part of an egalitarian feminist tradition, dedicated to eradicating inequalities based on sexual division. Certainly, as I demonstrate below, there is a strong resonance between Wollstonecraft's call to 'see the distinction of sex confounded' (*VRW*, p.148-9) and Holtby's enduring vision of 'a society in which there is no respect of persons, either male or female, but a supreme regard for the importance of the human being'.<sup>53</sup> Caine places Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* within a broader feminist turn, shifting away from the grassroots militant activism of the suffragettes to the analyses of psychological and cultural conditions of gender inequality.<sup>54</sup> According to Caine, Holtby contributed to a growing corpus of feminist theory in the interwar years that included Eleanor Rathbone's *The Disinherited Family* (1924), as well as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and later *Three Guineas* (1938). As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Rathbone was committed to a 'new feminist' outlook that privileged the 'woman's point of view' and sought improvements for women as wives and mothers. Thus, where Holtby demanded the abolition of inequalities predicated on sexual division, Rathbone took women's differences from men as the starting points for her feminist demands. Similarly, the introduction to this thesis highlighted Holtby's dilemma over Virginia Woolf's attitude to sexual division. Though Holtby approved of Woolf's

<sup>52</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 12 October 1934, fol. 20.

<sup>53</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Feminism Divided' in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.47-50 (p.49).

<sup>54</sup> Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1997), p.209.



concept of the androgynous mind in *A Room of One's Own*, she remained doubtful over whether Woolf endorsed restrictive notions of masculinity and femininity. Caine also considers Holtby's dilemma over Woolf. In this section, I expand on Caine's observations to locate Holtby within interwar feminist theory by comparing her with both Woolf and Rathbone. I also suggest that the theoretical concerns of Holtby, Woolf and Rathbone are indebted to the precedent set by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Bearing in mind Caine's observations, we might consider Holtby's appeal to Wollstonecraft as a spur to the shift in the interwar women's movement from grassroots to theoretical feminism. *Women and A Changing Civilisation* therefore demonstrates not only how Wollstonecraft's ideals of equality can still speak to interwar culture but invokes *A Vindication* as part of a feminist turn to theoretical, cultural and psychological critique. Holtby's understanding of Wollstonecraft, as the start of a 'psychological revolution' in her own right, positions *A Vindication* as a pre-Freudian psychological analysis. Kaplan has commented on this and described *A Vindication* as 'the first full discussion of the psychological expression of femininity', adding that

the briefest look will show that an interest in the psychic life of woman as a crucial element in their subordination and liberation is not a modern, post-Freudian preoccupation. On the contrary, its long and fascinating history in 'left' feminist writing starts with Mary Wollstonecraft who set the terms for a debate which is still in progress.<sup>55</sup>

Taylor has since developed Kaplan's observations and explored the psychic importance of divine love and imagination in Wollstonecraft's thought. She argues

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<sup>55</sup> Cora Kaplan, 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism', in *Seachanges: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp.147-176 (p. 155).



that Wollstonecraft seeks a single 'Truth' for men and women and strives to cancel out disparities produced by sexual division through her appeal to God. Taylor's perspective refutes previous feminist readings of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* as a negative onslaught against sexual desire. Instead, she claims that Wollstonecraft presses for women to see themselves not through the male gaze as objects of passionate desire but through the eyes of God as part of a wider religious eroticism aimed at heavenly perfection. 'The struggles of the female spirit were,' according to Taylor 'Wollstonecraft's first attempt to depict the psychological turmoil of women caught between customary attitudes and inner imperatives' (Taylor, p.112). Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* therefore represents one of the earliest depictions of woman's psychological struggle to define herself as a 'human being' rather than simply in reference to man. Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* demonstrates that this psychological struggle continues for women in the 1930s. Holtby is concerned that the very ideal of 'human character', which sparked the first 'psychological revolution' of the women's movement, is under threat in the interwar period from Freud's 'psychological revolution' and from fascism.

Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* also recalls *A Vindication* by turning a feminist psychological gaze on masculine attitudes and masculine behaviour towards women. Wollstonecraft had set the precedent for this also with her criticism of soldiers, sailors and clergy, who she claimed were bereft of moral reason and heroism because they merely followed their leader in blind faith (*VRW*, pp.96-99). Wollstonecraft also disapproves of chivalry because it serves to oppress women through dissemblance. This developed in Holtby's thought into what she terms the 'Chivalry Complex' (*Women*, p.109).



Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* therefore strives to re-ignite the 'psychological revolution' towards Wollstonecraft's egalitarian 'ideal of humanity'. It brings this ideal into dialogue with the interwar fascination for psychology both inside and outside feminism. The following discussion considers how Holtby achieves this theoretical turn in her writing by first examining how she makes Wollstonecraft's concept of 'human character' speak to interwar concepts of 'character' premised on sexology and Freudian psychoanalysis. To achieve this, Holtby negotiates Wollstonecraft's call to erase sex distinction through the influence of Virginia Woolf. Secondly, I turn to how she elides egalitarian and difference feminist concerns in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* by integrating the psychological emphasis of Eleanor Rathbone's feminist thought with Wollstonecraft's 'ideal of humanity'. Through this Holtby develops her arguments for equal pay into a psychological critique that identifies masculine complexes at the root of demands for sexual division.

### **'a character as a human being'**

When Woolf observes that '[i]n and around 1910, human character changed', she indicates how 'character' had become a mutable entity for the twentieth century under the influence of Freud and sexology.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, when Holtby cites the phrase 'a character as a human being' from *A Vindication*, she sets up a point of comparison between Wollstonecraft's conception of non-gendered 'character' and Freudian notions of a 'character' derived from sexual drives. We might assume that Holtby, much like Woolf, was conscious that the concept of 'character' was an unstable entity with shifting foundations that threatened timeless liberal ideals of 'human character'

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<sup>56</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', in *Collected Essays*, vols 6 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), I, 319-337 (p.320).



or ‘a character as a human being’. Holtby’s 1930s work folds Wollstonecraft’s ideal into Woolf’s recognition of the psychological mutability of character to argue against a concept of character premised on differences between the sexes.

A glance at the full passage in *A Vindication*, from where Holtby takes her quote, reveals that Wollstonecraft’s call for a ‘character as a human being’ also contested a gender ideology that sought to categorise ‘character’ according to sexual divisions:

Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex, and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone. (*VRW*, p.82)

Wollstonecraft intends to disregard those ‘pretty feminine’ phrases used by men to keep women in their ‘weak elegance of mind’ and to write outside the gendered economy of thought and value endemic to eighteenth century culture. The wish to ‘obtain a character as a human being’ is both a wish for human equality and a desire to write as neither one sex nor the other. Wollstonecraft gestures to the inextricable connections between language and gender in eighteenth century thought that denied women’s equal status as human beings.

A century and a half later, Holtby renews the call for a woman’s right to have a ‘character as a human being’. Where Wollstonecraft sought to communicate herself as



a non-gendered writer, Holtby is keen for women to be recognised as non-gendered psychological subjects and questions the very categories of masculine and feminine:

We do not know how much of what we usually describe as ‘feminine characteristics’ are really ‘masculine’ and how much ‘masculinity’ is common to both sexes. Our hazards are often wildly off the mark. We do not even know – though we theorise and penalise with ferocious confidence – whether the ‘normal’ sexual relationship is homo- or bi- or hetero-sexual. We are often content to make vast generalisations which quite often fit the facts enough to be tolerable, but which – also quite often – inflict indescribable suffering on those individuals who cannot without pain conform to our rough and ready attempt to make all men good and happy.

It seems possible that in a wiser world we should walk more delicately. We might, perhaps, consider individuals as individuals, not primarily as members of this or that race, sex, and status. We might be content to love the individual, perceiving in him or her a spirit which is divine as well as human and which has little to do with the accident of the body. (*Women*, p.192)

Holtby’s thoughts allude to the enormous impact of sexology and psychoanalysis on the public imagination post-war and the potentially damaging consequences of their pronouncements on sexual types. As early as 1906, the English translation of Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* had circulated notions that the characters of men and women were determined solely by their different sexual characteristics. ‘The woman’, he claimed ‘is devoted wholly to sexual matters, that is to say, to the spheres of begetting and reproduction [. . .] The greater absorption of the human female by the sphere of sexual activities the most significant difference between the sexes’.<sup>57</sup> Such notions of sex as the defining force of character were elaborated upon and popularised

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<sup>57</sup> Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (1903), trans. 1906 in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.25-28 (p.25).



after the First World War through the work of Havelock Ellis and Freud. In *Man and Woman*, for example, Ellis echoes Weininger's position arguing that women are defined by their greater involvement in the sexual sphere and their passivity. He claimed that 'woman's prime, though by no means exclusive, work centres in her maternal function, and is constitutionally apt to be largely maternal in nature, even when the maternal function is not exercised'.<sup>58</sup> Though Ellis' *Man and Woman* was originally published in 1894, the 1934 edition still proclaimed this fundamental difference between the sexes. '[I]t would be absurd to speak of the "equality" of the two whole sexes', Ellis insists, asserting his preference for 'the entire equivalence of the sexes' instead (*Man and Woman*, p.v).

Freud too discussed the influence of sex and sexuality on the formation of character and posited that character was formed by the repression and sublimation of instinctual drives during infancy and at puberty. As he clarifies in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, '[w]hat we describe as a person's "character" is built up to a considerable extent from the material of sexual excitations and is composed of instincts that have been fixed since childhood'.<sup>59</sup> The differences between the characters of the sexes for Freud were produced by each sex's different experience of the Oedipus Complex, namely that the threat of castration ended the boy's libidinal ties to the mother whereas the little girl's Oedipus Complex was initiated by the realisation of castration and development of penis-envy. As he puts it in his 1925 essay, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction of the Sexes', 'the little girl's recognition of the anatomical distinction of the sexes forces her away from masculinity and masculine masturbation onto new lines which lead her to

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<sup>58</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Secondary and Tertiary Sexual Characteristics*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn revised (London: William Heineman, 1934), p.446.

<sup>59</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905) in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1977), VII, 31-169 (p.164).



femininity'.<sup>60</sup> All of this Freud suggests leads to the different character traits of women as compared to men: 'Character traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women [. . .] would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego' due to their different journey through the Oedipus Complex (Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences', p.342).

Holtby's vision of a world where the 'accident of the body' did not intrude upon an individual's character or role in society in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* is one of the boldest expressions of her resistance to what she perceived as the stress on sexual division in sexological and psychological discourses. Its place in the conclusion of *Women and a Changing Civilisation* marks it out as the logical development of Holtby's thought along the lines mapped out by Wollstonecraft's ideal of attaining 'a character as a human being'. Holtby's emphasis on the importance of the individual's status as an equal citizen rather than as a member of one sex or the other provoked a mixed reception. Anthony M. Ludovici, an outspoken anti-feminist and proto-fascist slated Holtby's calls for common humanity and equality. He maintained that all women should be mothers and that spinsters symbolised social and racial decline. In his view, Holtby's feminist demand to erase sex distinction was founded on a philosophical hoax propagated by Socrates that the truth lay in the unseen rather than visible matter and Holtby was laughable because she had fallen for it without question:

Let it be said for the hundredth time that Socrates in order to save his face played a hoax on humanity. He taught humanity that the invisible was real and the visible the unreal human being. He taught in fact that the body did not matter . . . The muddle this hoax has

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<sup>60</sup> Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction of the Sexes' (1925) in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1977), VII, 323-344 (p.340).



created, particularly in England - the most Platonized of all European countries - is fantastic. And Miss Holtby's book is merely one of the many products of this muddle [. . .] And since this hoax of Socrates tinctures and vitiates every one of the feminists claims and arguments, the whole school of Socratic dupes cannot discuss any aspect of the sex problem properly.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to Ludovici, Holtby's endorsement of the body as 'accident' received praise in more sexually radical circles. For instance, Alison Oram's study of the marginal egalitarian feminist and homosexual journal, *Urania*, reveals that this journal held Holtby in high esteem as a radical opponent of heterosexual hegemony and a paladin of gay and transgender politics. The journal's motto 'sex is an accident' found obvious alliances with Holtby's vision at the end of *Women and a Changing Civilisation*. According to Oram, every issue of *Urania* called for the confusion of sexual division as a positive step forward. As such, *Urania* epitomised a resistant strain in feminist thought during the interwar years that refused to hedge its demands within the parameters of traditional femininity, set out by sexology and psychoanalysis.<sup>62</sup> According to Oram, within mainstream feminism, 'only a few feminists like Holtby resisted' the dictates of this drive towards sexual division.<sup>63</sup>

Oram is certainly right to observe Holtby's resistance to sexual division but both her contemporary critics and her supporters misread her as demanding the erasure of physical sexual differences altogether. Holtby was not arguing, however, for androgyny. Just as Wollstonecraft had proclaimed her 'wild wish to see the distinction of sex confounded except where love animates the behaviour' (*VRW*,

<sup>61</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Anthony M. Ludovici, 'Women and Socrates', *New English Weekly*, 20 December 1934, WH/4/4.12/01m.

<sup>62</sup> Alison Oram, 'Feminism, Androgyny and Love Between Women in *Urania*, 1916-1940', *Media History*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2001, 57-70 (65-66).

<sup>63</sup> Alison Oram, 'Sex is an Accident': Feminism, Science and the Radical Sexual Theory of *Urania*, 1915-1940' in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.219-227 (p.227).



p.148-9), Holtby too recognised that the distinction of sex had its place. As she acknowledges in 1928, '[t]he abolition of sex would not be desirable, even if it were possible'.<sup>64</sup> *Women and a Changing Civilisation* was not concerned with arguing for an androgynous society but for a society that looked beyond the body and beyond sex instinct as the foundations of character. Holtby sought for ways in which Freudian concepts of 'character' based on sex might be resisted and Wollstonecraft's call for common humanity renewed. Much of the thought in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* began two years earlier in 1932, when Holtby was writing the first critical appreciation in English of Virginia Woolf's oeuvre. Here, she recognised that Woolf was battling with the same problem: '[a]gainst the insidious suggestions of psychologists, she [Woolf] took her stand on her conviction of a humanity stronger in its spiritual unity than its sexual difference'.<sup>65</sup> Though, as I indicated in the introduction to this thesis, Holtby was never quite convinced whether Woolf wholly resisted or endorsed the fashion for sexual division, she nevertheless understood part of Woolf's project as undermining essentialist accounts of femininity and masculinity. Holtby saw Woolf achieving this through a rational approach to questions of instinct and through her appeal to a transcendental force of 'reality'.

For Holtby, Woolf's psychological explorations represent the antidote to Freud's. In a 1931 review of Woolf's *The Waves*, she contrasts Woolf's delicate and controlled investigation of the unconscious with Freud's destructive rampage through the mind:

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<sup>64</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Personal Pronoun', in *Women Talking: An Anthology from The Guardian Women's Page, 1922-35~1957-71*, ed. Mary Stott (London: Pandora, 1987), pp.135-7 (p.136).

<sup>65</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978; first pub. 1932), p.31. Further page references are hereafter denoted in the main text by *Virginia Woolf*.



The regions which she has opened up are still uncharted and largely unexplored. The terrific pioneer, Freud, leapt across them with such a banging of drums and flashing of high explosives that the tumult of his progress has not yet died down, and it is still difficult to see, without distortion, the wildly waving trees and broken jungle beside his crashing tail, as we follow him, menaced by those enormous bogies the Ego and the Id. Mrs Woolf has entered stepping delicately yet boldly, her courage fortified by her invincible confidence in the intellect, in the importance of truth, and in the Socratic method of inquiry. Armed by her reverence for reason, she has ventured into those labyrinthine wildernesses where the law of reason does not run, and keeping her eyes open, her judgment clear and her poet's vision unimpeded, has seen so much that she is still unable to convey the full measure of her extended knowledge.<sup>66</sup>

Freud is compared to a dinosaur in a prehistoric jungle and his concepts of the Ego and the Id relegated to the superstitious world of the bogeyman. By contrast, Woolf's is a delicate and methodical approach allied to 'intellect' and a 'reverence for reason'. Just as the pioneer, Mary Wollstonecraft, 'launched her intelligence, and her anger against the restriction of women's education, the curtailment of their civil and political rights and the subjugation of their persons' (*Women*, p.41), Woolf is depicted as deploying her 'reason' against the traditional structures of instinct where 'the law of reason does not run'. Holtby seems to gesture here towards viewing Woolf as a twentieth century version of Mary Wollstonecraft.

With her reverence for Woolf's 'Socratic method of enquiry', Holtby also began to contemplate and integrate Woolf's approach to transcending sexual divisions into her own. Marion Shaw has documented the close working relationship between Woolf and Holtby during the 1930s, arguing that Woolf's later works, *Three Guineas* and

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<sup>66</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'An Explorer's Record, "The Waves" By Virginia Woolf (Hogarth Press)', *Time And Tide*, 10 October 1931 in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985; repr. 1985), pp.291-4 (p.292).



*The Years*, were heavily influenced by Holtby's practical feminist activity and the factual material on women's occupations with which she provided Woolf.<sup>67</sup> Holtby may well have influenced Woolf's turn towards politics and realism in her writing, as Shaw argues, but in my view this influence was not one-sided; Woolf also had a bearing on Holtby's work and this is most evident in its increasingly psychological approach during the 1930s. *A Room of One's Own* certainly influenced how Holtby approached the problem of transcending the inequalities of sexual division. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf postulated that 'we escape a little from the common sitting room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality'.<sup>68</sup> This seems to have inspired Holtby who offers her own adaptation of it in 1932:

The difficulty of sex-differentiation is overcome by taking as criterion some measure of value greater than the measure of sexual difference. That criterion is the relationship of the individual to reality – a relationship which men and women share alike. By concentrating on intellectual likeness instead of physiological differences, she achieves her knowledge of unity. (*Virginia Woolf*, p.184)

Indeed, this 'reality' figures variously in Woolf's work. Holtby understands Woolf's 1928 novel, *Orlando*, as a practical expression of the theory of creative and intellectual androgyny set out in *A Room of One's Own*. *Orlando* is the fantasy tale of an aristocratic landowner who lives for three hundred years and in that time changes gender from a man to a woman, transforming into a woman at the start of the eighteenth century. The 'reality' that surmounts sexual difference and allows the

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<sup>67</sup> Marion Shaw, 'Alien Experiences': Virginia Woolf, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain in the Thirties', *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (Harlow, Essex: Addison, Wesley & Longman, 1997), pp.37-52 (pp.39-40).

<sup>68</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, ed. and intro Morag Shiach (Oxford: O.U.P., 1992; first pub. 1929), p.149.



continuity of the sex-changing protagonist is the land owned for three centuries by Orlando's aristocratic family and the literary tradition. The influence of both of these is fused together in Orlando's poem 'The Oak Tree', a thinly veiled allusion to Vita Sackville West's real-life poem, 'The Land'.<sup>69</sup> Following Woolf's example, Holtby too begins to explore how different concepts of 'reality' might represent 'a value greater than the measure of sexual difference', such as professional and intellectual collaboration in the public sphere and historical change.

A 1928 article for the *Manchester Guardian*, entitled 'The Personal Pronoun', highlights how Holtby's resistance to the fashion for sexual division reflects both Wollstonecraft and Woolf. Here, Holtby relates an anecdote about a business meeting with a socialist editor who, on becoming immersed in their discussion, forgets Holtby's gender and refers to her as 'brother'. Holtby confides in the reader her initial surprise and then her growing satisfaction with this incidental slip:

At first the unexpected title amused and almost disconcerted me. Then, as I realised its implication, I became unusually pleased. For we had grown so much absorbed in the business before us that my new acquaintance had lost all sense of my identity. I was no longer a rather troublesome young woman who might or might not be of use to the particular cause he was sponsoring, I was 'brother', an impersonal creature, drawn into that comradeship of 'those who want to get something done', who are like the angels in heaven without sex or nationality.<sup>70</sup>

Holtby draws on the metaphysical rhetoric of sexless angels but roots this abstract concept of equality in the practical situation of relations in the workplace. Both

<sup>69</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* ed. and intro. Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: O.U.P., 1998; first pub. Hogarth Press, 1928).

<sup>70</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Personal Pronoun' (1928) in *Women Talking: An Anthology from The Guardian Women's Page, 1922-35~1957-71*, ed. Mary Stott (London: Pandora, 1987), pp.135-7 (p.135).



Holtby's observations and her pleasure at being regarded as an 'impersonal' 'brother' strongly echo a similar anecdote related by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication*. Like Holtby, Wollstonecraft too relates an episode when she was regarded as a man in intellectual, if not business, conversation. The following is presented as a footnote to Wollstonecraft's arguments for the expansion of women's interests into intellectual rather than purely frivolous pursuits:

I have conversed, as man to man, with medical men on anatomical subjects, and compared the proportions of the human body with artists, yet such modesty did I meet that I was never reminded of by word or look of my sex [. . .] Men are not always men in the company of women, nor would women always remember that they are women, if they were allowed to acquire more understanding. (*VRW*, p.234)

Wollstonecraft's anecdote supports her argument for the expansion of women's intellectual powers, underlining how such endeavours would not sully female innocence but moreover enhance women's modesty and virtue by extending their rational faculties. Through her anecdote, Wollstonecraft hopes to prove herself an example of objective rational femininity: one who has gained in modesty enough to discuss anatomy with men without prurience and without her sexed identity obtruding into the conversation. Both Holtby and Wollstonecraft dismiss notions that masculinity and femininity, when brought into close contact, necessarily exaggerate each other and suggest instead that a non-gendered collaboration can be achieved in the professional and intellectual arena. As Holtby elaborates, at times we become so absorbed in our work that neither sex nor even gender matter: '[t]o the really busy man or woman sex for a time becomes just gender, masculine, feminine or neuter. And after a certain point of interest has been reached even gender loses its



significance' ('The Personal Pronoun' in Stott, p.136). Sex and gender therefore become redundant categories before the larger impersonal project of collaborative work in both Holtby's and Wollstonecraft's thought.

In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby appeals once again to an impersonal force in order to transcend sexual division and claim for women a 'character as a human being'. This time it is the force of historical change:

The historians of women take it for granted that she is primarily concerned not with geography, but with biology, not with philosophy but with personal morality and ideal character. Man's problem is his relationship to the universe, women's they suggest her relationship to man . . . "He for God only; she for God in him . . ."

So widespread and dominating is that notion that only by a strong effort of will can we remember that women may also seek some answers to the ultimate questions of the good, the true or the beautiful; . . .they also are affected by climate, wealth and government [. . .] that in short, the only adequate history of women would be a history of humanity.

(*Women*, p.4)

Holtby's argument for women's common humanity with men and for equal rights is predicated on her belief that women share with men a direct relationship with history. She echoes the arguments made by Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication*, signalling that the move to transcend sexual division by a greater impersonal force predates both her own and Woolf's feminist thought. Where Woolf invokes the land or literary tradition and Holtby woman's direct relation to historical change, Wollstonecraft invoked woman's direct relationship to God. Wollstonecraft's appeal to God as the basis of an egalitarian politics is perhaps alluded to in Holtby's comparison between women's relationship with history and with God through the quotation, "He for God only; she for God in him". Wollstonecraft's entire argument rests on the demand that women's



rational faculties and understanding should be developed so that they can communicate directly with God, rather than through their husbands. By prohibiting women from developing their reason and encouraging them to become fawning coquettes, Wollstonecraft argued that eighteenth century society enslaved and dehumanised women instead of educating them to be human beings. She protested that if women 'be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves', urging for society to '[t]each them in common with man, to submit to necessity' (*VRW*, p.121). Wollstonecraft wanted morality to have 'an eternal foundation' in God for both women and men and demanded that women be educated to 'feel the dignity of a rational will that only bows to God' (*VRW*, p.121). Holtby's 'eternal foundation' is historical change rather than God but the appeal to transcend disparities rooted in sexual division remains the same. Her aim is to demonstrate to the reader the political and social change that women have achieved for themselves and for society as 'human beings' during the hundred and fifty years since Mary Wollstonecraft.

Progress for Holtby therefore lies in overcoming notions of 'character' premised on sexual categories. *Women and a Changing Civilisation* stresses that the forward momentum of historical change can only be sustained if individuals are allowed to retain their 'character as a human being': for their characters to be defined purely in terms of masculinity or femininity marks a backward step in Holtby's view. Yet, Holtby is aware that in following Woolf's premise of taking 'reality', or in her case historical change, as the transcendent perspective with which to look beyond biological categories, the nature of that 'reality' must itself be scrutinised. *Women and a Changing Civilisation* therefore not only follows in a tradition of feminist thought, emanating from Wollstonecraft, in its appeal to a larger force beyond sexual



division. It also followed Wollstonecraft's analysis of the masculine attitudes that underpinned and sustained inequalities. In her analysis of the interwar political and economic climate, Holtby begins to develop a psychological understanding of the political and cultural institutions that perpetuated the call for 'men who are men and women who are women'.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, she pre-empted Woolf's astute readings in *Three Guineas* (1938) where the rise of fascism is traced back to a masculine fear of women's difference from men. Here Woolf diagnoses sexual inequalities as the symptom of masculine psychopathology, deciding that 'Society it seems was a father, and afflicted with the infantile fixation too.'<sup>72</sup>

### **Masculine Complexes**

Writing *Women and a Changing Civilisation* in the early 1930s, Holtby did not have the benefit of Woolf's insights in *Three Guineas* (1938) for psychologising the rise of fascism. Yet the trend towards constructing a body of feminist theory that psychologised women's inferior economic, social and political status was already underway. Eleanor Rathbone's *The Disinherited Family*, first published in 1924, had paved the way for the development of a feminist psychological critique of patriarchy and its resistances to women's economic emancipation. It stressed the need to identify psychological motives for economic policy and power disparities between the sexes. As Rathbone urges, '[w]hen the obvious explanation of any part of human behaviour (including our own) seems insufficient, we have learned to look beneath the surface for the hidden motive, unacknowledged and probably unconscious, which may have

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<sup>71</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: B.U.F., 1932; repr.1934), p.54.

<sup>72</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* ed. and intro Morag Shiach (Oxford: O.U.P., 1992; first pub. 1929), p.354.



prompted it'.<sup>73</sup> A decade later, Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* builds on this trend in feminist thought to psychologise the conditions of inequality. Though Rathbone had always emphasised the importance of the woman's perspective as the starting point for her feminism, sometimes at odds with Holtby's calls to erase sexual division before the law, it is clear that *Women and a Changing Civilisation* shares Rathbone's psychological strategy.

Holtby acknowledges the difficulties of remaining optimistic in an economic and political climate dictated by instinct and sexual division but remains convinced that certain feminists fight on:

In every civilised country are little groups of older women with memories of suffrage struggles, and young women who grew up into the post-war optimism, and whose ideas remain unchanged by the fashions of the hour. It is they [. . .] who look towards a time when there shall be no wrangling over rights and wrongs, man's place and woman's place, but an equal and co-operative partnership. (*Women*, p.115)

This strongly echoes her statement of 'Equality First' feminism in 1926, when she envisages 'a society in which men and women work together for the good of all mankind' ('Feminism Divided', *TG*, p.49). The implication is that Holtby places herself amongst those women who continue to fight and whose ideas remain 'unchanged' and forever focused on gender equality. The allusion to *A Vindication*, discussed above, underlines Holtby's very act of writing *Women and a Changing Civilisation* as a continuation of such 'unchanged' feminist ideals, reiterating Wollstonecraft's 'ideal of humanity' (*Women*, p.43). Though Holtby insists that egalitarian 'ideas remain unchanged', *Women and a Changing Civilisation* testifies in

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<sup>73</sup> Eleanor Rathbone, *The Disinherited Family*, intro. Suzie Fleming (London: Falling Wall Press, 1986; third edn 1927; first pub. 1924), p.340.



its psychological approach to the need for feminists to adapt their demands for equality to a civilisation which is itself constantly changing. *Women and a Changing Civilisation* depicts Holtby's attempt to adapt these 'unchanged' feminist ideals to the interwar world of instinct and passion. She achieves this by following Rathbone's advice to 'look beneath the surface for the hidden motive' in the hope that she, like Mary Wollstonecraft before her, might generate a 'psychological revolution' away from instinct towards reason and equality.

Rathbone's analysis was concerned to uncover the economic hardship experienced by working-class families. Her main concern was to critique the blind spot of socialist politics, arguing that women's work in the home should be recognised remuneratively. *The Disinherited Family* marks the culmination of many years of dedicated social reform work and investigations into social theory. It outlines Rathbone's proposals to improve the economic position of working class women in the home. To alleviate poverty, Rathbone proposed that families be endowed so that women received a direct payment made to them to cover the costs of child-care and domestic up-keep. She maintained that paying men more than women in order to compensate for their dependents as the main breadwinner was ineffective and placed no value on women's work in the home. Family endowment, in her view, promised to diminish poverty and reward women's labour in the domestic sphere.<sup>74</sup>

Rathbone, however, discovered that there was male resistance to her proposition, particularly within the Labour Movement which had prioritised the male breadwinner's wage; payments to mothers were seen as a potential threat to the male wage level. In *The Disinherited Family* Rathbone reads beyond the economic arguments against her demands and ascribes this hostility to psychological motives

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<sup>74</sup> For a detailed overview of Rathbone's position in relation to socialism, feminist thought and social theory see Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.199-218.



such as fear and the desire for power. This leads her to diagnose masculine hostility to women's economic independence as psychological complexes. She invents the 'Turk Complex' to explain patriarchal resistance to motherhood endowment. Tyrannical fathers manifest this 'Turk Complex', according to Rathbone; they resist her proposals for paying women directly for labour in the home because of their male instinct for domination and power and play out their 'Turk Complex' by striving to hold onto the security of possession and authority afforded them by their dependent wives and children (Rathbone, pp.343-345).

From the early twenties, Holtby too addressed problems around women's economic emancipation using psychological arguments. Yet, where Rathbone tackled the issue from the perspective of the working-class mother, Holtby approached from the angle of the single, professional woman. In a 1924 article, 'Ladies First', written for *Time and Tide*, Holtby defends women's rights to work amidst the increasingly hostile allegations that women had stolen men's jobs following the First World War. She stresses the need for equal work for equal pay, the primary demand of egalitarian groups like the Six Point Group to which Holtby belonged. Without this, she argues, women become derided as 'black-legs' by the Trade Unions and made the scapegoats for the old Trade Unions, attempting to solve low wages by making women redundant in order to increase men's pay. The answer according to Holtby was for industrial women to follow the example of professional women such as teachers and civil servants and form their own trade unions to agitate for equal pay.<sup>75</sup> As she qualifies, '[w]hile women accept lower wages and humbler positions for equal work, the unions must fear their competition and condone their exclusion ('Ladies First', *TG*, p.53-54). Carol Dyhouse has rightly accused Holtby here of over-simplifying the differences

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<sup>75</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Ladies First', *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.50-54 (pp.52-53).



between professional and industrial women on the issue of pay and trade unionism.<sup>76</sup> Despite her class blindness here, Holtby is however, alert to the psychology that underpins these economic arguments against equal pay. Trade unions, Holtby observes, ‘fear’ competition from women. Recent scholarship on the interwar period has also highlighted the psychological explanations for the masculine resistance to women’s emancipation. For instance, Sally Alexander highlights that ‘[f]ear of cheap labour was the rational kernel in the labour movement’s antagonism towards the female worker, but the denigration of the feminine should alert us to deeper levels of unease’.<sup>77</sup> Billie Melman’s analysis of the media’s castigation of professional and industrial women also reveals that ‘[t]he real causes of the crusade were, it seems, not economic. They should be looked for in the sphere of mental attitudes and prejudices.’<sup>78</sup>

Holtby increasingly turns to examining such ‘deeper levels of unease’ and prejudice in the 1930s. A 1934 article, entitled ‘Fear and the Woman Who Earns’ revisits her analysis of male hostility to women’s work. Here, however, this ‘fear’ is detected across the political spectrum, within the Labour Movement as in 1924 and now also in European fascism. ‘It would be foolish,’ she suggests ‘to deny that undercurrent of fear, resentment and antagonism running through current comment upon the position of the woman wage-earner’.<sup>79</sup> Holtby observes how this intensifies over the interwar decades into ‘trying to remove woman from the general labour market, wherever she comes into competition with men’ (‘Fear and the Woman Who

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<sup>76</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1880-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.81.

<sup>77</sup> Sally Alexander, ‘Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and ‘30s’ in *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994), pp.203-224 (p.205).

<sup>78</sup> Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.25.

<sup>79</sup> Winifred Holtby, ‘Fear and the Woman Who Earns’, *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985; repr. 1985), pp.81-83 (p.81).



Earns', *TG*, p.81). In England, this is manifested by individual employers wishing to replace all women with men and by local authorities refusing to employ married women in teaching. In Germany, however, Holtby details how this 'fear' of women's competition in the marketplace has resulted in an economic policy founded on sexual division, where women have been enticed back to the home with the promise of marriage loans and their jobs handed over to male relatives:

In Germany this drive against the industrial and professional employment of women is justified as a recognition of the importance of her maternal functions and real domestic interests; but that is not the true reason. Wherever there exists two sections of a community, one of which is for some extraneous reason paid at lower rates than the other for equal work, the same antagonism, the same fear, the same campaign for prohibition exists. ('Fear and the Woman Who Earns', p.82)

Fear, sexual antagonism and inequalities based on sexual division are inextricably linked in the debate around women's employment according to Holtby. Just as Rathbone had emphasised masculine 'fear' at the root of the 'Turk Complex', Holtby too indicates that 'fear' is the main factor militating against women's economic emancipation: 'few emotions are so destructive of the happiness of communities as fear' ('Fear and the Woman Who Earns', *TG*, p.82).

In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby develops these observations. Following Rathbone's example, she invents her own complexes to diagnose manifestations of the masculine 'fear' of woman. Holtby's invention is the 'Chivalry Complex'. This she claims expresses the male anxiety to be physically stronger than women and provide for them even when they are capable of working for their own living:



under the chivalry complex between men and women, it is still regarded as a virtue in a man to “look after” his wife and daughters; further it is still regarded as a virtue in a woman to submit gracefully to his protection. Dependence, slightly shameful in a man, is, under this tradition, pleasing in a woman. (*Women*, p.109)

This ‘chivalry complex’ is responsible for a number of social evils in Holtby’s view. The masculine adoration and protection of women, Holtby suggests, places women on a pedestal to blind them to more pressing social injustices, diverting their gaze from the social and legal issues such as inequalities in custody rights over their children, the double sexual moral standard, prostitution and child abuse (*Women*, p.105-6). The ‘chivalry complex’ places value only on those women who willingly resign themselves to male protection and dependency within the home. Women who work are socially maligned because of this masculine complex. Many are forced to avoid marriage because tradition dictates that the husband must support the wife. As Holtby points out, the ‘chivalry complex’ is everywhere: men squabble with women in restaurants over who will pay the bill and the husband quarrels with his wife because ‘his chivalry complex forbids the man to let his wife pay the housekeeping bills’ (*Women*, p.108). Holtby begins her account of the ‘chivalry complex’ humorously, half mocking the authority of the psychologist. As one reviewer of *Women* pointed out, ‘Miss Holtby’s zeal for the cause, however, sometimes leads her to quaint psychological theories’.<sup>80</sup> Holtby’s theory that “There are men who will not even kiss a girl in a taxi for which they have not paid’ is regarded as a prime example of this. Holtby herself acknowledges that the ‘chivalry complex’ may seem laughable: ‘[s]et down in its crude form, the argument is comical and characteristic. But it goes

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<sup>80</sup> Anon., ‘Woman To-Day And Yesterday’, *Sunday Times*, Oct 28 1934, p.9.



deep, it dies hard, and few influences have caused more unhappiness in this period of transition' (*Women*, p.106).

For Holtby, despite her irreverent tone, there is a serious side to the 'chivalry complex', just as there had been to Rathbone's 'Turk Complex'. Rathbone's analysis revealed that the 'Turk Complex' permitted the blind spot of socialist politics to endure, regardless of the fact that it exacerbated rather than relieved working class poverty. Holtby's 'chivalry complex' points to the other end of the political spectrum, suggesting that it underpins the fascist calls for sex segregation. The 'chivalry complex' for Holtby is another manifestation of the call for sexual division. Her observations in this respect recall Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*. Wollstonecraft's 'wild wish to see the distinction of sex erased' follows her own rejection of chivalry as the basis from which men seduce women into accepting the inequities of sexual division. 'I lament', Wollstonecraft declares, 'that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions which men think it manly to pay to their sex, when in fact they are increasingly supporting their own superiority' (*VRW*, p.148). Wollstonecraft is outraged by the exhibition of chivalry, of fawning men, eager to pick up a fallen handkerchief 'when the *lady* could have done it herself' (*VRW*, p.148). Holtby seeks to explain why men throughout the ages continue to adopt these chivalrous gestures of superiority. As she notes, 'by social tradition all women (however virginal, muscular and tough) are potentially pregnant; all men, however, physically unfit and tired, are muscular heroes; and the strong must at all costs protect the weak' (*Women*, p.107). In Holtby's view, the 'chivalry complex' therefore expresses an over valorisation of women's role as mother, perceiving all women first and foremost as potential mothers: '[i]t is often combined',



Holtby observes, 'with an artificial and sentimentalised respect for motherhood' (*Women*, p.106).

Later on in *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby refers to Oswald Mosley and his pronouncement on the role of women in his British Union of Fascists: '[t]he part of women in our future organisation will be important, but different from that of men' (*Women*, p.161). Mosley's vision of the different roles that men and women will play in his movement is, we might deduce, yet another exhibition of the 'chivalry complex'. This is developed more clearly in Holtby's notes for a debate before the Teacher's Meeting in Manchester on February 15, 1935. Here, Holtby seems to have been allotted the ironic challenge of debating for 'the suppression of women' and to make her point she adopts Mosley's perspective, this time citing the full quote from Mosley's *A Greater Britain*. Mosley is cited as a man who believes women should be protected and kept out of the public and political sphere in case they should be hurt: '[o]ur organisation began as a men's movement because we had too much regard for women to expose them to the genialities of broken bottles and razor blades'.<sup>81</sup> Mosley it seems suffers from the 'chivalry complex' and illustrates for Holtby the darker, more serious side, of chivalry: a winning mask for chauvinism and male domination.

*Women and a Changing Civilisation*, however, moves beyond identifying purely masculine complexes such as the 'Chivalry Complex' or Rathbone's 'Turk Complex'. With her invention of the 'Slump Complex' Holtby diagnoses a cultural complex of her time, manifested by both men and women which not only threatens women's economic and political freedoms but also the continuance of liberal democracy. The 'Slump Complex' is set up as a diagnostic of the 'revolt against

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<sup>81</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Lecture Notes, Winifred Holtby, 'That Women Should be Suppressed', WH/1/1.25/01a-h. The quote is taken from Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, (London: B.U.F., 1934; first pub. 1932), p.54.



reason', discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Holtby explains the 'slump complex' at length, describing it as a composite set of reactions reflecting disenchantment with democracy and widespread political apathy:

The individual will seems unimportant, the individual personality is dwarfed, by happenings on so large a scale. The world is too much for them. They give it up, content to be passive passengers in a vehicle they cannot steer.

This is the slump complex – this narrowing of ambition, this closing-in alike of ideas and opportunities. Somewhere a spring of hope has failed. As though it required too great an effort against such odds to assume responsibility for their own individual destiny, they fall back upon tradition, instinct, orthodoxy. The slump is a general resignation of humanity of its burden of initiative, and women fall under its influence as much as men. (*Women*, p.116)

The 'slump complex' manifests itself in numerous ways according to Holtby. She sees it affecting those young men and women, like herself, who had grown to maturity since the end of World War 1. She reveals that '[j]ust after the war, society was infected by a rush of idealism to the head. Democracy, reason, equality and cooperation were acclaimed as uncontested virtues' (*Women*, p.113). Women cherished high hopes for equal opportunities in employment and politics but Holtby notes that the return of demobbed soldiers and the failure of the 1926 General Strike, revealed that economic prosperity was not to last. Hope faltered and with the economic slump after 1928, women were forced to see their jobs as privileges rather than a national service. High unemployment levels forced them into the ignominious position of black-legs (*Women*, pp.112-114). The recourse to 'tradition, instinct, orthodoxy' figures as the rise of European fascism and 'the revolt against reason':



In Italy, Germany, and Ireland a new dream of natural instinctive, racial unity was arising, which designed for women a return to their “natural” functions of house-keeping and child-bearing; while in the English speaking countries a new anti-rational philosophy combined with economic fatalism, militated against the ebullient hopes which an earlier generation had pinned to education, effort, and individual enterprise. (*Women*, p.114)

The ‘slump complex’ represents the turn away from ‘education, effort, and individual enterprise’, associated with Holtby’s ‘rational philosophy’ (*Women*, p.188). The effect on women’s position is made clear; amidst ‘economic fatalism’ women’s work in the public sphere is castigated and the ‘anti-rational philosophy’ of Britain and the United States slides towards the fascist gender policy already implemented in Germany and Italy.

Holtby is concerned to follow Mary Wollstonecraft’s example and start her own ‘psychological revolution’ to combat the ‘slump complex’ that she has diagnosed. The conclusion of *Women and a Changing Civilisation* reads almost like a feminist manifesto. She sets out six ‘Conditions of Equality’: the first, already mentioned, ‘a rational philosophy’; the second, mechanical civilisation to reduce physical disparities between male and female workers; third, birth control to enable women to plan their lives; fourth, the abandonment of military values; fifth, greater political, social and economic flexibility to enable mothers to work; and finally innovative domestic organisation to reduce labour in the home (*Women*, pp.188-191). Her prose throughout this manifesto is suffused with calls to solidarity and co-operative action through the repetition of ‘we need’ (*Women*, pp.190-191). Her demands suddenly become the readers’ also and with this shift in tone, her polemic assumes an expansive and futuristic perspective:



I think that the real object behind our demand is not to reduce all men and women to the same dull pattern. It is rather to release their richness of variety. [. . .]

And it is possible that in such a world we should find a variety of personality undreamed of to-day rendered unimaginable by prejudices, grievances, fears, and repulsions[.] (*Women*, p.192)

After highlighting these ‘prejudices, grievances, fears and repulsions’ to the reader through the ‘Chivalry Complex’ and the ‘Slump Complex’, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* then encourages the reader to look beyond them. Holtby’s argument uncovers the ‘hidden motives’ and the emotional impulses of interwar culture and encourages readers to rise above them in order to comprehend a panorama of historical trends, as well as the hope for future gender equality. The ‘slump complex’ that Holtby had defined above as ‘this narrowing of ambition, this closing-in alike of ideas and opportunities’ (*Women*, p.116) is directly countered by Holtby’s trans-historic invocation of Mary Wollstonecraft’s forward-looking ‘ideal of humanity’ (*Women*, p.43). Indeed, Holtby’s futuristic panorama reminds us of Wollstonecraft’s statement of her own prescient philosophy: ‘Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally: a crowd of authors that all *is* right now: and I that all will *be* right’ (*VRW*, p.95). Just as Rousseau in the eighteenth century had asserted that, according to Wollstonecraft ‘all *was* right’, Holtby too battles against the overwhelming cultural imperative to decipher human nature by looking back to primitive times in a post-Darwinian and post-Freudian world. Like Wollstonecraft, Holtby continues to look forward, anticipating a time when ‘all will be right’. For Holtby, however, this time is only possible if we accept and put ‘instinct’ in its place:



So long as we permit our nerves and instincts and traditions to over-ride our brains, our wills, <sup>our</sup> our independent judgments, we shall be afraid to practise the disciplined experimentalism which the transition to equality demands . . . The journey of mankind up from the slime of primeval forests has been a comparatively short one. We came trailing – not only clouds of glory – but dreads and hatreds and superstitions like jungle weeds. And those instinctive fears are reinforced by social and economic circumstance.

(*Women*, p.188)

Holtby's psychological approach in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* both synthesises and extends the socio-political analyses of *The Disinherited Family* and *A Room of One's Own* to consider the psychological impact of the economic depression and the related psychological causes of 'the revolt against reason'. Her psychological approach is, however, guided by its 'rational philosophy' of human equality which remains indebted to the 'psychological revolution' begun in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*.



## Conclusions

Holtby invokes Mary Wollstonecraft's legacy for the interwar period by acclaiming *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as the 'bible of the women's movement' (*Women*, p.41). Through this, Holtby posits Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist icon, affirming the importance for women to maintain 'a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex' under the pressures towards anti-rationalism and its creed of instinct and sexual division. By organising her historical account of women's progress around *A Vindication*, Holtby successfully questions concepts of linear progress. She depicts history as a swinging pendulum and draws parallels between the interwar political climate and Wollstonecraft's debate with Rousseau and Talleyrand in the eighteenth century.

Holtby's reading of Wollstonecraft as part of a renewed call for women's rights to educational, economic and political equality is framed within the terms of Wollstonecraft's debate between reason and feeling. By describing the anti-rationalist movement as 'a revolt against reason', Holtby underlines how Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* was received in the interwar context as a rational and egalitarian counter-argument to anti-rationalism.

Holtby, however, did not read Wollstonecraft as simply a woman of reason and this is evident not only in her descriptions of her as a passionately political woman but also in the inspiration she draws from *A Vindication* for her theoretical feminism. Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* integrates Wollstonecraft's calls for common humanity and sexual equality with psychological approaches in interwar feminism. By developing this approach, Holtby strives to diagnose the interwar trend towards 'anti-rationalism' as a psychological response to the aftermath



of the First World War. In her very act of producing such feminist theory, Holtby acknowledges her debt to the 'psychological revolution' that began with Mary Wollstonecraft. *Women and a Changing Civilisation* urges its reader to look beyond instinct and sexual division and see the future through Mary Wollstonecraft's eyes as 'a radiance of adventure, of happiness and satisfaction now only hinted at by poets and prophets' (*Women*, p.192).



## Chapter 2

### The Brontë Myth and the 'Legend of the Frustrated Spinster'

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#### Introduction

Throughout the interwar decades, the Brontës acquired a mythical status in the popular imagination. The Brontë family as a whole became increasingly divorced from historical fact and indistinguishable from their fictional characters in the interwar imagination. The eccentricities of Emily and Branwell Brontë became a focus of interest and Charlotte became relegated to the sidelines. Lucasta Miller offers some explanations for this in her recent biography, *The Brontë Myth*, where she argues that Charlotte Brontë propagated two conflicting myths: firstly, the myth of the self-created, autonomous woman embodied by her fictional heroines such as Jane Eyre; and secondly a myth about the author herself, that she was the poor, shy and retiring spinster daughter. This latter myth was designed to deflect social criticism of the first and is the one immortalised by Elizabeth Gaskell in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.<sup>1</sup> After the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, Gaskell observes, 'Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents – her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman'.<sup>2</sup> According to Miller, this myth sanitised Charlotte Brontë and Gaskell developed it to dispel criticisms of Brontë's subversive fiction. By the interwar period, the image of Charlotte as a submissive spinster daughter predominated: her status as rebellious feminist icon had

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<sup>1</sup> Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> E.C. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Smith Elder and Co, 1858), p.285.



faded, despite efforts by Millicent Fawcett to resurrect Charlotte Brontë as a feminist inspiration for the suffrage movement (Miller, p.154). As a result, Miller argues that Charlotte Brontë and her fiction were divested of their feminist message of self-assertion throughout the early and mid-twentieth century:

If the fictionalisations of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were unconcerned with historical precision, they were equally unconcerned with what are now called gender issues. Despite the fact that suffragettes had claimed her as a pioneer before the First World War, Charlotte was not particularly associated with feminism in the middle years of the twentieth century, though she was melodramatically presented as battling against Victorian patriarchy in the shape of the father who opposed her marriage. (Miller, p.154)

For Miller, only in the 1960s did feminists begin to revitalise the feminist potential of Charlotte Brontë's novels.

Miller's main claim for the diminished feminist potential of Charlotte Brontë's texts in the interwar period lies in the rise of the mass-market romance. The explosion of cinema culture from the late twenties transformed the Brontës. By the 1940s both they and their characters had become romantic Hollywood heroines: a transformation that has been accounted in detail by Patsy Stoneman in her book, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, Charlotte Brontë's novels have been important inspirations for the twentieth-century romance genre but this does not tell the whole story of their feminist reception between the wars, as Miller supposes. Miller associates Charlotte Brontë's status as a precursor to the rise of mass-market romance with the decline of

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<sup>3</sup> Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (London: Harvester, 1996), pp.87-134.



her feminist legacy and the decline of her feminist reception. In my view, however, this reading is based on two misconceptions. The first is that mass-market romances for women cannot sustain a feminist politics, an assumption that has been successfully challenged by the work of Tania Modleski and Janice Radway.<sup>4</sup> The second is that this de-radicalising of Charlotte Brontë was hegemonic amongst interwar women writers. More accurate would be to read the reception of Charlotte Brontë amongst interwar feminists and female novelists not as increasingly conservative but as an ambiguous site of cultural conflict between the past and the present, and between Victorian and modern femininity. As a result, Charlotte Brontë and her work retained a feminist influence amongst some female interwar writers, including Winifred Holtby.

In this chapter, I explore how Holtby exploits the ambiguous reception of Charlotte Brontë's novels in the feminist interwar imagination. In order to do this, I consider the class and tastes of Holtby's contemporary readership and how these shape attitudes to the Brontës and the 'Brontë myth'. From this I move on to discuss how Holtby exploits her readers' knowledge of Charlotte Brontë's novels in order to undermine, rather than endorse, the conventional romance genre. Consequently, I argue that she revivifies the subversive feminist challenge of Charlotte Brontë's novels in order to combat the interwar emphasis on sexual division.

Holtby revitalises the feminist message of Brontë novels such as *Shirley* and *Jane Eyre* to defend the single woman's right to work. A self-declared spinster

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<sup>4</sup> Tania Modleski argues that 'mass-produced narratives for women contain elements of protest and resistance underneath highly "orthodox" plots' because the surrender of the heroine also hides the female fantasy of revenge on the uncaring male. Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Routledge, 1982), p.25. Janice A Radway bases her analysis on a survey carried out amongst a community of women readers. She concludes that whilst romance reading involves a certain complicity with heterosexual norms and hierarchies, it also entails a protest against women's roles as wife and mother since the very act of reading represents a temporary refusal to surrender to the demands of husband and children. See Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984; repr.1991), p.213.



herself, Holtby has become renowned as paladin of the spinster between the wars. Her work is an excellent illustration of how the category of 'spinster' is shaped by the social and political climate.<sup>5</sup> In 1934, Holtby observed that '[t]he Legend of the Frustrated Spinster is one of the most formidable social influences of the modern world'.<sup>6</sup> The 'modern world' of which Holtby speaks was one that had witnessed the destruction of almost one million young marriageable men in the First World War and embraced Freudian concepts of sexual instinct. In such a world, thousands of so-called 'superfluous women' were destined to social censure as sexually repressed virgins. As Sheila Jeffreys points out, '[w]hilst previously the word spinster had simply meant unmarried women, it was coming to mean, specifically, women who had not done sexual intercourse with men.'<sup>7</sup> Alison Oram's work has proved particularly influential in highlighting feminist resistance to this spinster stereotype in the interwar period and in locating Holtby within such discourses.<sup>8</sup> When in 1934, Sir Oswald Mosley, defamed 'spinster politicians' as 'this distressing type', Holtby was quick to defend the spinster against Mosley's charges.<sup>9</sup> He claimed that 'the interests of the "normal woman" occupy no place in the attention of Parliament' and that the

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<sup>5</sup> Various feminist scholars writing on the spinster have noted this. Mary Daly argues that the very word 'spinster' 'has been a powerful weapon of intimidation and deception, driving women into the "respectable" alternative of marriage'. See Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), p.393. Laura Doan also points out that the spinster is 'a highly particularized entity' and her experiences are not the basis from which to universalise those of all single women. See Laura Doan, 'Introduction', *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth Century Novel*, ed. Laura L. Doan, foreword by Nina Auerbach (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp.1-18 (p.2). Martha Vicinus documents how the spinster became defined in the early twentieth century according to socio-economic, historical and psychosexual categories which were then used to discredit groups of professional and politically active women. See Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), pp.206-210; p.262.

<sup>6</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (Chicago: Cassandra Editions, 1978; first pub. London John Lane, 1934), p.125.

<sup>7</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985), p.175.

<sup>8</sup> Alison Oram, 'Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World?: The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses', *Women's History Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1992, 413-33 (425-7).

<sup>9</sup> Oswald Mosley, 'Fascism Will End the Battle of the Sexes: Women Will be Free to Choose Careers, Direct Representation in Parliament', *The Fascist Week*, No. 10, 12-18 January, 1934, p.5.



spinster, ‘a Member of the “No-Man’s Land” ’ was the reason why (*ibid*). Holtby counters such charges by clarifying that spinster politicians had fought for issues affecting all women, such as ‘better education, maternity and child-welfare, child protection, school meals and slum clearance’.<sup>10</sup> Throughout her fiction and non-fiction, Holtby defends the spinster against specious charges of repression and insanity. She contests the post-Freudian understanding of frustration as repressed sexual and maternal instinct. Instead, she points to the spiritual frustrations of those employed in monotonous factory work or of married and unmarried middle-class woman without any occupation. With the social, economic and political advances for women, Holtby argues that ‘in the twentieth century frustration and spinsterhood need not be identical’ (*Women*, p.133).

Holtby’s exploitation of the romance genre and Brontë myth are integral to the positive portrayals of the spinster in her novels, *The Crowded Street* (1924) and *South Riding* (1936), as this chapter will demonstrate. By representing her spinster characters as reincarnated Brontë heroines, Holtby contests the ‘Legend of the Frustrated Spinster’. Both Muriel Hammond in *The Crowded Street* and Sarah Burton in *South Riding* privilege work over romance in order to continue their lives as successful, independent single women. In various ways, they echo Brontë’s Caroline Helstone, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe and embody a strident optimism about spinsterhood. Sarah Burton, *South Riding*’s spinster schoolmistress epitomises this she boldly declares, ‘I was born to be a spinster, and by God, I’m going to spin.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Winifred Holtby, ‘Shall I Order a Black Blouse?’, *News Chronicle*, 4 May 1934, in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.171-173 (173).

<sup>11</sup> Winifred Holtby, *South Riding: An English Landscape* (London: Virago, 1988; repr. 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2000; first pub. Collins & Co, 1936), p.49.



## Part 1

### ‘A fable of wish-fulfilment’: The Brontë Romance Plot

The Brontë sisters and their fiction occupied a paradoxical place in the interwar imagination. Heroines like *Jane Eyre* pointed forwards to a feminist conception of female autonomy but the image of the Brontës themselves and their lives at Haworth Parsonage also pointed back to docile domestic femininity. Similarly their texts, *Jane Eyre* in particular, became absorbed into a growing appeal for escapist romance. In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Q. D. Leavis even claimed that novels like *Jane Eyre* had given rise to the interwar romance ‘best-seller’. Certainly, *Jane Eyre* conformed to many of the characteristics of what Nicola Beauman terms ‘[t]he sugary, unreal qualities of the inter-war romance’, particularly the demand for a reassuringly uplifting tale.<sup>12</sup> As Beauman outlines, ‘[t]he basic storyline should be boy meeting girl, various seemingly insuperable difficulties coming between them and, finally the revelation of their true and hitherto suppressed feelings’ (Beauman, p.178). Such trite, unchallenging reading material was anathema to Leavis. She despised literature that indulged emotional excess and for this reason she prized Jane Austen and Emily Brontë over Charlotte Brontë. ‘[T]he novels of Charlotte Brontë’, insists Leavis, ‘for instance, exhibit a shameful self-abandonment to undisciplined emotion’ (Leavis, p.130).<sup>13</sup> On these grounds, Leavis groups both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* into a list of popular books that also includes interwar romantic ‘best-sellers’ such as Michael Arlen’s *The Green Hat* (1924) and Margaret Kennedy’s *The Constant Nymph* (1925). Her justification is damning:

<sup>12</sup> Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel 1914-1939* (London: Virago, 1983), p.174.

<sup>13</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Bellew, 1990; first pub. Chatto and Windus, 1932), p.130.



*Jane Eyre* is on the contrary a fable of wish-fulfilment arising out of experience, in which figure such common indices as the child's burning sense of injustice, self-idealisation [. . .] blinding and maiming of the beloved to enhance the subject's devotion, self-abasement to the verge of death followed by dramatic salvation, recognition by enviable relatives, etc., all repeated with little variation in *Villette*. Most best-sellers go on writing the same novel because it is the only one they can produce, and each variant of it is successively popular because the appeal of the commoner day-dreams is inexhaustible – they represent for both author and reader a favourite form of indulgence. (Leavis, p.237)

Leavis signals to how *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* stand as the forebears of modern romance. Yet, for others besides Leavis, Charlotte Brontë's texts retained some of their rebellious unconventionality along with their lure of wish-fulfilment. As Rebecca West observed, '[t]he hack writer spins the consoling fantasy, and so does Charlotte Brontë, but she also depicts the hunger that goads the spinner to the task'.<sup>14</sup> For West, though Charlotte Brontë's fiction fails to meet the criteria for high art, it fails precisely because of its underlying challenge to nineteenth century gender ideology. In the absence of an affluent patriarch, Charlotte Brontë made literature her living in order to support the family. Charlotte Brontë's conflict between family obligations and literary endeavour, however, made her an ambiguous figure for interwar feminists. During the early 1920s, when Holtby was struggling to establish her own writing career, Charlotte Brontë and her text *Jane Eyre* become sites of personal and professional conflict. Later, in her second and final novels, Holtby succeeds in deploying this paradoxical force of Charlotte Brontë to political effect.

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<sup>14</sup> Rebecca West, 'Charlotte Brontë' (1932) in *The Essential Rebecca West*, intro. Samuel Hynes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp.429-438 (p.431).



We see her using the wish-fulfilment of tales like *Jane Eyre* to engender critical feminist inquiry amongst her readership.

### **‘The Feminine Middlebrow’**

In *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, Nicola Humble defines Holtby’s reader as part of the ‘feminine middlebrow’: a ‘cultural construct’ including novels and authors, as well as a reading community characterised by shared class traits and questions of taste.<sup>15</sup> Humble develops her term from interwar categories of ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ which were used to define readers according to class and intelligence. Holtby indicates her knowledge of such terms, particularly in relation to the reading public, in a 1935 article for the *Left Review* entitled, ‘What We Read And Why We read It’. Here, she identifies three strata of reading community: the small eclectic class of avant-garde writers such as T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf; a second category described as ‘a large and ever increasing body of competent fiction’; and a third class including paperbacks and novelettes, more often borrowed than bought, and defined as romances, wild west, foreign legion and gangster fiction.<sup>16</sup> This last class is typified as ‘the wish-fulfilment of cheap fiction’, namely ‘sexual fulfilment’ and, according to Holtby, ‘constitute[s] a form of emotional indulgence’ (*Left Review*, p.113), descriptions which closely echo Q. D. Leavis. By contrast, the second class of literature is non-descript and the most difficult for her to define; its identity is shaped only by how it differentiates itself from the first and third categories. This second class of literature supplies the lending and circulating libraries of Boots, Mudies, W. H. Smiths and the

<sup>15</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p.28.

<sup>16</sup> Winifred Holtby, ‘What We Read and Why We Read It’, *Left Review*, January 1935, vol 4., pp.112-114 (p.112).



Times Book Club and is borrowed rather than bought. It represents the category to which Holtby's books belong and was named the 'middlebrow' by other writers, though not by Holtby herself. 'Middlebrow' was a term often used with derogatory overtones during the interwar period, especially by so-called 'high-brow' writers like Virginia Woolf, who, in a 1929 unpublished letter to *Nation and Athenaeum*, despised the 'middlebrow' for being 'betwixt and between'.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless it remains a useful categorisation for discussing middle-class reading communities in the twenties and thirties. Humble's gender specific definition of the 'feminine middlebrow' provides a good starting point from which to discuss Holtby's predominantly female, middle-class readership.

Humble's definition of the 'feminine middlebrow' as a 'cultural construct' alludes to the complex process by which cultural and class tastes are produced by, as well as productive of, class identity. Holtby also identifies this in her 1935 survey. In her view, the range of this second category, or 'middlebrow' as others liked to call it, was diverse, appealing to the 'great intermediate class of novel reading public' (Left Review, p.112). The reading tastes and very identity of this 'great intermediate class' were shaped by book recommendations in the Sunday Times or Observer: of the books consumed by this 'great intermediate class', Holtby remarks, '[t]heir influence is ephemeral. On their social and ethical values are constructed the social and ethical values of the middle-class' (Left Review, p.112). Holtby's attention to the act of reading and the formation of class identity here sharpens her analysis of the interwar reading public into a political message for reform. 'What we read is closely associated with what we are and how we live', Holtby argues, and 'the springs of taste are social and economic as well as cultural and individual' (Left Review, p.114). Holtby was

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<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), pp.113-19 (p.114).



well aware that reading not only reflected class tastes but also had the potential to shape them and in this we might say that Holtby spied the opportunity to reform and shape her readers. At the centre of the ‘feminine middlebrow’ lay the iconic Brontës and Holtby’s fiction sought to re-craft her reader’s consciousness by manipulating this Brontë bedrock of the ‘feminine middlebrow’ cultural identity.

According to Humble, the ‘feminine middlebrow’ was a genre characterised by a mix of realism with class-consciousness and humour (usually at the expense of the intellectual highbrow). In addition, it constantly reinforced ‘middlebrow’ taste through intertextual allusions and cross-referencing to other ‘middlebrow’ literature, as well as to nineteenth century ‘middlebrow’ icons, which, as Humble observes, become central to its cultural identity:

Continual reference to other books is [. . .] one of the key ways in which the women’s middlebrow novel establishes itself as a distinctive generic identity, with different types of literature invoking particular aspects of identity. So Victorian novels (those of Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, and more surprisingly Charlotte M. Yonge, appear frequently) suggest an adherence to traditional narrative values. (Humble, pp.54-5)

The Brontës figured large in the common tastes and class attitudes of the ‘feminine middlebrow’ community. The Brontë novels were often considered as formative influences on developing middle-class female subjectivity and were popular childhood or adolescent reading for the ‘feminine middlebrow’ reader (Humble, p.178).

Why the Brontës became so central to the ‘feminine middlebrow’ and its female reader’s identity is a question explored by both Humble and Stoneman. Humble finds that ‘[t]he use of the Brontës in the feminine middlebrow novel is



illustrative of a contemporary obsession' (Humble, p.176). Stoneman too points to their appeal amongst female novelists: '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* - but particularly *Jane Eyre* - were themselves "bagged", especially by inter-war women attempting to come to terms with their new situation' (Stoneman, p.87). Humble and Stoneman draw our attention to various indicators of this Brontë 'obsession'. As Humble details, the Brontë Museum opened at Haworth Parsonage in the 1920s and photographs taken to commemorate its opening depict a huge crowd attending: a record of the Brontës' mass following during the interwar years. In 1933, three plays based on the Brontës' lives ran simultaneously in London and from 1935, numerous biographies appeared (Humble, p.176). The Brontës even went into mass media and became disseminated to wider audiences as a result. *Jane Eyre* was performed on radio four times between 1934 and 1944. Successful sound movies of the Brontë novels were also produced in 1934 and 1944; the 1944 film production of *Jane Eyre* with Orson Wells playing Rochester marked the height of its Hollywood appeal (Stoneman, p.87). Both Stoneman and Humble, however, remain ambiguous over whether this 'feminine middlebrow' obsession with the Brontës signalled developments or retrenchments in women's progress between the wars.

Stoneman believes Charlotte Brontë's 1847 text, *Jane Eyre*, spoke to the inter-war woman confronted by cataclysmic social change during and after the First World War. For the middle-class woman in particular, the interwar world was not only one of Eton crops, short skirts, political enfranchisement and increased education opportunities at Secondary and University level but also one of increased professional opportunities, especially in medicine, politics and teaching. Jane's strident determination that 'women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do' appeared to have reached



fruition in the radical twenties.<sup>18</sup> Yet Stoneman seems unsure if this progressive note is the real appeal of *Jane Eyre* during this period and suggests that its continued relevance may signal the deceleration of women's progress under a post-war anti-feminist backlash and economic depression. Its enduring presence might therefore, Stoneman argues, reveal that 'the relationship of power between men and women had changed little, so that a novel like *Jane Eyre* which dealt with gender relations in 1847 was still highly relevant to this period' (Stoneman, pp.87-88).

Humble suggests that the Brontë 'obsession' was part of a backward glance to the traditional large Victorian family in the face of shifts in the interwar period towards smaller nuclear families of two children. The concept of the 'family' in the 'feminine middlebrow', according to Humble, clung conservatively to the old Victorian family model: a deeply ambiguous space, representing both refuge and confinement, and embodying both nurturing and destructive properties (Humble, p.49). The family as a space of idiosyncratic and neurotic confinement is what Humble defines as the 'eccentric family' in the 'feminine middlebrow' and the appeal of the Brontës, she suggests, lay in their status as the original 'eccentric family' which both attracted and repulsed readers (Humble, p.177). As a result, the Brontës and their 'eccentric' life at the parsonage became texts or myths in themselves. Humble's reading suggests a complicated relationship between the Brontë obsession and women's progress, suggesting that the Brontës had the potential to point historically backwards *and* forwards for 'feminine middlebrow' readers. According to Humble, the reading process itself enveloped the reader into an ambiguous identification with the Brontës and their heroines.

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<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Margaret Smith and intro. and revised notes by Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: O.U.P., 2000; first pub. 1847), p.109. Page numbers are hereafter denoted in the text by *JE*.



The Brontës and their texts occupy a conflicting cultural space for women between the wars. On one level, their feminist insistence on female autonomy, action and education speaks to the social, political and economic emancipation gained by women in the early twentieth century. Yet on the other, as both Stoneman and Humble indicate, their popularity reflects a backward turn towards Victorian domesticity. For the ‘feminine middlebrow’ reader, they therefore hovered on the cusp of embracing and disclaiming conventional modes of domestic femininity.

Holtby’s understanding of the Brontës, particularly Charlotte Brontë in her non-fiction, affirms their feminism and contribution to women’s progress. *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, for example, recognises ‘the Clergy Daughters’ School, Casterton, immortalised in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë’ as a protest against the low standards of women’s education in the nineteenth century (*Women*, p.54). Indeed, Holtby was keen to explore Charlotte Brontë’s protest against the inferiority of women’s education even at the start of her writing career in 1923. Yet, Holtby’s attitude to Charlotte Brontë at this time appears deeply ambivalent and Brontë’s life becomes a site of professional and emotional conflict. Holtby attempts to write an article on Charlotte Brontë in the early twenties but never completes it, which she resignedly confesses to her friend Jean McWilliam, a schoolmistress in South Africa:

I send you a *Time and Tide* containing an article of Vera’s with which I think you will agree. It is founded upon much experience. I originally tried to write it. It was I who was reading Charlotte Brontë, but I couldn’t get it down well enough.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Winifred Holtby to Jean McWilliam, 27 February 1923 in *Letters to a Friend*, ed. Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam (Bath: Cedric Chivers, 1971; first pub. 1937), pp.163-166 (p.166).



Gaskell's *Life of Brontë* was a favourite topic of discussion between Holtby and Brittain during the 1920s and it seems the ideas that Holtby 'couldn't get [. . .] down' became the material for Brittain's 1923 article for *Time and Tide*, entitled 'The Whole Duty of Woman'. In this article, Charlotte Brontë is depicted as a precursor to the modern interwar career woman, torn between intellectual and creative aspirations and the demands of family life. Brittain's comparison indirectly offers some insight as to why Holtby herself 'couldn't get it down' on paper. 'The Whole Duty of Woman' discusses the conflict experienced by the modern women of the interwar period, keen to pursue educational and professional opportunities but still hampered by the demands of family and domestic duty. Where the son's education always remains paramount, Brittain observes, the daughter's is forever seconded to her family duty, be it caring for sick relatives or running the household in her mother's stead. These difficulties partially describe Brittain's own situation but more fully pertain to Holtby's struggles in the early twenties, as she strove to justify her literary ambitions against her mother's disapproval.<sup>20</sup> Alice Holtby wanted her daughter to work in the local Yorkshire community, caring for the destitute and impoverished waifs and strays that were often given solicitude in the Holtby family home. Holtby had turned away from this, however, to start her writing career in London, though she remained at her mother's beck and call for most of her life. Though the conflicts of Holtby and Brontë are therefore comparable, their solutions are not. Brontë, according to Gaskell, submits to what Brittain describes as 'personal devotion' and 'bound by the gentle and negative virtues of modesty and resignation, stayed at home to care for a sick

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<sup>20</sup> See Holtby's letter to her mother in 1923. Winifred Holtby, *Letters to a Friend*, ed. Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam (Bath: Cedric Chivers, 1971; first pub. 1937), p.369.



father, a drunken brother and a sister'.<sup>21</sup> Though she does not entirely turn her back on family duty, Holtby refuses the mantle of conventional domestic femininity and leaves the family home, guilt-ridden but free. We might surmise that it was Holtby's identification with Charlotte Brontë's conflict and her refusal to sacrifice her professional aspirations to family duty that made it so difficult for her to write on Brontë in the early twenties: yet another testimony to the troublesome legacy of the Brontë myth.

Though Holtby left it to Brittain to write on Charlotte Brontë for *Time and Tide* in 1923, some of the emotional conflict bound up with Brontë filtered into her first novel, *Anderby Wold*. The heroine of this novel is the pragmatic but stifled farmer's wife, Mary Robson, who has sacrificed hopes of romance to marry a man almost twice her age so that he might help her manage her Yorkshire farmstead. The surprise intrusion of a young Socialist journalist from Manchester sparks Mary's romantic interest. Their first encounter, as Sally Brown has observed, rewrites the scene in *Jane Eyre* when Jane and Rochester first meet.<sup>22</sup> Travelling home in the moonlight by horse and cart, Mary is forced to stop because her horse has a shard of flint stuck in its hoof. The would-be romantic hero steps out of the dark to come to Mary's aid but Mary is reluctant to play the ailing heroine: 'she hated being seen at a disadvantage, and thought that her dignity could only be maintained by her independence'.<sup>23</sup> She asks her hero, later to be revealed as the young journalist, David Rossitur, to give her his knife so that she might remove the flint shard. Symbolically,

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<sup>21</sup> Vera Brittain, 'The Whole Duty of Woman', *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.120-123 (pp.120-121).

<sup>22</sup> Sally Brown, 'Love and Marriage in the Works of Winifred Holtby', in *It's My party: Reading Twentieth Century Women's Writing*, ed. Gina Wisker (London: Pluto Press, 1994), pp.147-173 (p.166).

<sup>23</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Anderby Wold*, intro. Mary Cadogan (London: Virago, 1982; first pub. John Lane, 1923), p.109.



however, his knife 'isn't much good. The blade is broken' and though eventually it is Rossitur who frees the horse's hoof, his status as a romantic hero is undercut when the horse kicks him and makes him ill (*AW*, p.109). Like Rochester, Rossitur is something of a lamed hero, who opens up the narrative space for female autonomy and self-assertion. Yet, Mary's self-assertion and autonomy are channelled into her role as premature domestic paragon. David's vain attempt to assert himself as 'a rabid socialist of the dangerous and most disreputable type' is quickly dismissed by the practical Mary, who argues '[y]ou are nothing so romantic [. . .] You are quite a young boy with a bad cold who has just been sick in the middle of the road, and you are coming home with me' (*AW*, p.115). Rather than a masculine saviour, David becomes an almost childish figure in need of succour, who Mary takes home to Anderby Farm. Here he becomes a child substitute as she nurses him back to health and a companion with whom she discusses politics as she goes about her domestic chores.

The allusion to *Jane Eyre* in this novel signals the start of the heroine's romantic plot but fundamentally it can only lead back to the domestic sphere that Mary finds so stultifying. Though Mary and David share a kiss, nothing more happens. Mary is after all married but, in addition, David is murdered just before the end of the novel by one of Mary's protégées. An ex-soldier, Mike Flynn, whom Mary has nursed through pneumonia, shoots him. Flynn is convinced that David's Socialist politics threaten the feudal conservatism that Mary and her farm represent and this highlights the complex conflict between conservative, landed politics and revolutionary socialism at the heart of this novel, as well as the conflict between personal emotion and political belief. Mary is caught between these conflicting forces and her quasi-Brontë romance with David lies at the centre of this turmoil. Through



her romance with David, Mary's eyes are opened to a world of romance and a world of politics that challenge her conventional values of femininity and her place in community life as philanthropist and village mother. But this can never lead to a narrative of self-creation and autonomy beyond the farm, as it seems to promise, because Mary must submit to convention and to family duty once her husband falls ill. David's death further serves to preclude Mary's and the reader's fantasies of future romantic union. Holtby seems to invoke the *Jane Eyre* plot here merely to loop the heroine back into her role as discontented farmer's wife, briefly straining forwards to offer a glimpse of the career woman and politician Mary might have been and then snapping her back into the role of dutiful wife and pre-war domestic angel.

Holtby's early work indicates the ambivalent position occupied by the Brontë myth in 'feminine middlebrow' representations of domestic femininity. Though the Brontë plot allows her early heroine to look beyond the farm to broader intellectual horizons, it also points back to family obligation and self-sacrifice. Holtby continues to explore this ambiguous position of the Brontës within 'feminine middlebrow' culture to increasingly political effect. Jean Kennard notes that this takes place on a surface textual level. Whereas the allusion to *Jane Eyre* in *Anderby Wold* is left up to the reader's imagination, Holtby's later texts state their allusions to the Brontë texts specifically through the thoughts of Holtby's spinster characters. Kennard suggests this is to undercut romantic wish-fulfilment.<sup>24</sup> The first of Holtby's ironic allusions occurs in her second novel, *The Crowded Street* (1924). Though critics have noted the impact of *Jane Eyre* on Holtby's feminist imagination, the influence of Brontë's *Shirley* on Holtby's representation of the spinster has been overlooked. Part 2 of this chapter therefore seeks to rectify this oversight by considering the effect of Holtby's

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Kennard, *Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership* (London: University Press of New England, 1989), p.168.



allusion to *Shirley* in *The Crowded Street*. Holtby's return to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as an ironic intertext for her final novel, *South Riding*, is discussed in Part 3 of this chapter. Before moving on to discuss Holtby's more overt allusions to Charlotte Brontë's novels in *The Crowded Street* and *South Riding*, I want to first consider how and why Holtby sought to influence her reader by appealing to the 'feminine middlebrow' desire for Brontë intertextuality.

### Questioning 'pleasurable excess'

Ambivalences over the relationship between Brontë's cultural status and women's progress are reflected in the 'feminine middlebrow' reading experience. The female reader's ability to recognise Brontë references in her novel guarantees her credentials as an educated, middle-class woman. As such, Humble argues that the Brontës became indices of sophistication and educated reading within the 'feminine middlebrow':

There is the assumption that the reader, also, will pick up the Brontë references – that such knowledge and interest in fact *defines* a certain sort of woman [. . .] The Brontës *represent* reading in some iconic sense, denoting the pleasurable excess of the ideal middlebrow woman reader over-identifying with what she reads. (Humble, p.178)

Humble suggests that the Brontës themselves became representative of 'middlebrow' femininity, of intelligent women at once gaining satisfaction from their recognition of textual allusions and losing themselves in the pleasures of identification. Again, it seems we are back with Q. D. Leavis' interpretations of the Brontë texts as indulgent wish-fulfilment. Recognising the Brontë intertextuality defines the 'feminine middlebrow' reader as intelligent and knowledgeable. Yet it also, paradoxically, gives



her license to cast off intellectual rigour for ‘pleasurable excess’, for the emotional indulgence that Holtby associates in her 1935 article only with the cheap romances of ‘low-brow’ fiction.

Holtby’s novels certainly court this ‘pleasurable excess of the ideal middlebrow woman’ with their allusions to Charlotte Brontë’s novels. Yet as *Anderby Wold* (1923) exemplifies, they fail to satisfy the wish-fulfilment of a conventional happy-ending. This is intimately tied up with Holtby’s challenge to the hegemonic ideals of conventional femininity endorsed by the romance genre. In a 1930 article entitled ‘Too Much Talk About Romance’, Holtby refutes the conventional happy-ending of the romance plot. She questions why love must be every woman’s first priority in life:

There are more ingredients than love in the real-life happy-ending, and our romancers would tell more convincing stories if they paid greater attention to these [. . .] Work and health are motives in human conduct that dominate us long after the force of love has passed, and they play as large a part in our lives as love, or a larger one, even during “the season made for joy” [. . .] A romantic attitude towards work and a scientific attitude towards romance would be a welcome change.<sup>25</sup>

This ‘welcome change’ in the romantic reader’s attitudes is, in my view, precisely what Holtby aims to engender through her subversive allusions to Charlotte Brontë’s romance plots. Yet it raises questions: why does Holtby use the romance plot in the first place and why does she invoke it only to foil romantic union? Her aim, it seems, is to rupture the ‘feminine middlebrow’ reader’s ‘pleasurable excess’ from within that

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<sup>25</sup> Winifred Holtby, ‘Too Much Talk About Romance’, *Daily Herald*, 12 September 1930. Hull Archives, p.8.



‘middlebrow’ romance genre. The reason for this lies in her challenge to romantic stereotypes and sexual division.

For Holtby, the interwar decades are characterised by the cultural and political pressure towards sexual division, facilitated by the popularisation of Freudian psychology and encapsulated in Oswald Mosley’s call for ‘men who are men and women who are women’.<sup>26</sup> In such a cultural and political climate, the wife and mother were revered whilst the single woman who did not follow them into ‘normal’ womanhood became the object of public disapproval. There were various categories of the single woman during the interwar years – the ‘Modern Office, Latch-Key or Sports Girl’, the flapper and the ‘Frustrated Spinster’<sup>27</sup> – of these the spinster came under the most vicious attack from all quarters, feminist and anti-feminist. All the other types of single girl, it was presumed, would finally meet the right man and belatedly conform to conventional womanhood. The spinster, however, defied the marriage plot set out for her by society, a point which Holtby herself stressed in distinguishing the spinster from the single girl:

Now by spinsters, I do not mean all the young girls who are expecting almost hourly to meet the man of their heart [. . .] I mean the women over thirty, like myself, who have no particular intention of marriage, whose principal interests are non-domestic, and who think it extremely improbable that they will ever themselves become mothers.<sup>28</sup>

In turning away from marriage, the spinster defied the interwar vogue for sexual division by remaining outside the heterosexual matrix. Holtby’s satirical play,

<sup>26</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: B.U.F., 1932; repr.1934), p.54.

<sup>27</sup> Holtby points to all of these various categories of woman in the interwar imagination in order to undermine them in her satire, *The Astonishing Island*, trans. Winifred Holtby, annotated by Robert Batt (London: Lovat Dickson Ltd, 1933), pp.80-84.

<sup>28</sup> Winifred Holtby, ‘The Non-Combatants: Spinsters and Maternal Mortality’, *Manchester Guardian*, Sept 4, 1930. Hull Archives.



*Eutychus and the Future of the Pulpit* (1928) sums up the multitude of psychological and quasi-medical writing weighted against the virginal spinster. Holtby's Bloomsbury intellectual, Anthony, describes the interwar fascination with sex and maternity:

Thus we have Mrs Charlotte Haldane, in *Motherhood and its Enemies*, emphasising the harm done by Intersexual Women . . . Mrs Bertrand Russell, a preacher of great vigour and writer of books called *Hypatia* and *The Right to be Happy*, is equally emphatic in her disapproval of virginity [. . .] The psycho-analysts have revealed the terrible consequences of sex-repression. Mr Havelock Ellis and Mr Langdon Davis, and Dr Marie Stopes all enlarge in different ways upon the importance of the erotic nature of man. Fanatics like Professor Weith-Knudsen, a Danish lawyer and economist, and Mr Anthony Ludovici have gone so far in their veneration of the consequences of sexual intercourse that they have made a new religion of maternity, and condemn all women who will not worship with them'.<sup>29</sup>

Anthony's observations not only demonstrate how Holtby saw virginity persecuted from all angles in interwar culture but they also indicate Holtby's acquaintance with a number of prominent works on the subject. Charlotte Haldane, Mrs Bertrand Russell, Havelock Ellis and Marie Stopes all believed that women should enjoy a full heterosexual sex-life and motherhood. As a result, all these writers maintained, to varying degrees, that spinsters who turned away from such womanly duties were destined to physical and mental pathology. The impact of such views on Holtby's literary representations of the spinster is detailed in the subsequent sections of this chapter. What is striking about Holtby's reading of interwar culture here, made via the highbrow intellectual Anthony, is its elision of disparate thinkers under the umbrella

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<sup>29</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit* (London: Kegan Paul, 1928), pp.72-73. Further page references hereafter noted in the main text by *Eutychus*.



of anti-spinster prejudice. For instance, Mrs Bertrand Russell (Dora Russell) was an ardent feminist and her book *Hypatia* was in fact a critical response to the anti-feminist views of the proto-fascist and eugenicist thinker, Anthony M. Ludovici.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless Holtby reads them as united in their mutual ‘veneration’ of ‘sexual intercourse’ and ‘maternity’. The inspiration for this ‘new religion’ was Freud. Anthony’s seventeenth century interlocutor, Fénelon de la Mothe, a religious philosopher, is mystified by the twentieth century’s choice of ‘saint’ (*Eutychus*, p.58) and remarks incredulously, ‘Your scientists would base their spiritual values upon the theories of a Viennese psychologist’ (*Eutychus*, p.76).

Writing on the spinster in 1934, Holtby laments that ‘Freudian psychology has sanctioned the extreme veneration of sex’ (*Women*, pp.131-2). Holtby’s understanding of psychoanalysis strongly reflected the various ways in which Freud’s theory of instinct had been received in the interwar climate. Freud had begun by tracing the aetiology of neuroses and hysteria to instances of psychological trauma arising from sexual abuse in childhood. He noted that this trauma impacted on the adult in later life by preventing the normal expression of sexual desire. Sexual instinct was therefore dammed up in what Freud termed a process of ‘repression’ which then became re-directed and manifested itself in hysterical symptoms.<sup>31</sup> Later with the development of his drive theory, Freud asserted that all children had sexual experiences that were channelled through the Oedipus Complex to produce adult sexual identity. The Oedipus Complex was itself a psychological and social mechanism by which certain sexual drives were legitimated and others were repressed. Freud’s theory therefore

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<sup>30</sup> For example, in *Hypatia or Woman and Knowledge*, Russell refers to ‘the author of *Lysistrata*’, Anthony M. Ludovici, as ‘[o]ne of the most inveterate anti-feminists’. See Dora Russell (Mrs. Bertrand Russell), *Hypatia or Woman and Knowledge* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), p.8.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Repression’ (1915) in *Metapsychology – The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1977), XI, 141-158, *passim*.



maintained that a certain amount of repression and redirection of sexual drives was necessary for the very existence of civilisation.<sup>32</sup> This aspect was, however, played down in the popular understanding of his theory between the wars. Instead, Holtby observes that ‘repression’ had become a dirty word and that many, particularly of the fashionable and intellectual elite, believed that the only way to ensure mental health was to avoid repression and pursue a hedonistic life of sexual libertarianism. A trip to Monte Carlo in 1928 confirmed her suspicions about the potentially damaging effects popularised Freudian theory might have on society. Even in the 1920s, Monte Carlo was a playground for the rich and famous; for Holtby, a middle-class farmer’s daughter, Monte Carlo revealed the lengths to which aristocratic hedonists would go simply to keep up with the Freudian vogue. Writing to Vera Brittain from Monte Carlo in 1928, Holtby wryly confides ‘[a]t Monte Carlo everyone is so much afraid of complexes and inhibitions that they all run about having relations with men, women and both - and get more and more hot and bothered’.<sup>33</sup> She reports back on the eccentric behaviour of the Monte Carlo clique for her regional paper, *The Yorkshire Post*, with the same tone of amused detachment:

They suffered from neurasthenia and melancholia and many other ills to which the flesh is not heir by legitimate descent, but which are given by gratuitous and illicit legacy. They suffered from a haunting fear of a perilous disease called Inhibitions. They were terrified of hideous evils of Repression, and in order to liberate themselves from these terrors they pursued laborious and often painful policies of Libertarianism, hoping to

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<sup>32</sup> For example see Sigmund Freud, ‘“Civilised” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness’(1908) in *Civilization, Society and Religion*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991), XII, 29-55 (p.37-39).

<sup>33</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 21 August 1928, fol. 18.



“release their complexes.” And the sad thing about it was that the more they sought to escape from inhibitions, the tighter the net closed down upon them.<sup>34</sup>

In Holtby's view, the terror of ‘the Freudian revelation’ (*Women*, p.161) propelled deluded pleasure seekers onto a self-defeating path of sexual promiscuity that entirely failed to cure them of their imagined ills. This insight steered Holtby towards the conclusion that the surrender to sexual instinct would not cure her generation's social and political problems. The more these individuals strove to unleash their instincts, the ‘tighter the net closed down upon them’. As the thirties progressed, this ‘net’ had, for Holtby, assumed a highly disturbing political guise in Oswald Mosley's call for ‘men who are men and women who are women’.

In Holtby's view, the answer lay in trying to control instinct rather than unleashing it. Inspired by the trained precision of the ballerina, Pavlova, whom she saw for the first time on her 1928 trip to Monte Carlo, Holtby speculates whether we should view the idea of control more positively. She rejects outright the popularly held myth in Monte Carlo that ‘“control” is really a kinder word for “inhibition” and “repression” which merely leads to outbreaks in another place, like a fat woman trying to lace herself tightly in stays’.<sup>35</sup> Controlling instinct, in Holtby's view, does not have to be psychologically pathological. Indeed, she becomes convinced of the reverse, that the lack of control was symptomatic of mental pathology - a diagnosis she was to make of Radclyffe Hall on reading her infamous *The Well of Loneliness*:

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<sup>34</sup> Winifred Holtby, ‘A Letter from Var: Dancers and Inhibitions’, *Yorkshire Post*, 24 August 1928, p.4.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*



Radclyffe Hall taught me a lot. She's all fearfully wrong, I feel. To love other women is not pathological. To be unable to control one's passions is. Her mind is all sloppy with self-pity and self-admiration. She's not straight in her mind.<sup>36</sup>

The importance of controlling passions and instinct was central to Holtby's interrogation of the interwar cultural and political pressures towards sexual division. She begins to wonder in 1928 whether the path to freedom might be through the control, rather than liberation, of the sexual instinct. As she mused in a letter to Brittain: 'Control liberates. Lack of control binds and makes clumsy in a thousand ways. Are we going all wrong in crying "Less Control"? Perhaps we are'.<sup>37</sup>

In her 1928 article for the *Yorkshire Post*, she elaborates on the guises this 'control' might take:

When I read a textbook on psychology, or even a Plato dialogue, my mind is not a free mind, but bound by its own limitations. Yet what separates me from Pavlova, or shall I say the vivid and searching intelligence of Miss Rebecca West, whose essays I have just been reading, is not an excess of discipline, but a lack of it [. . .] To use leisure we need, not the lounging idleness of the pyjamaed bathers at Monte Carlo, but the vigorous and disciplined austerity of a dancer, an athlete, or a scholar.<sup>38</sup>

Control here includes 'intelligence' and 'discipline' and applies to sport, dancing, philosophy, reading and, importantly, to psychology itself. In her 1928 article the act of reading potentially embodies control, intelligence and discipline in Holtby's view. Reading is Holtby's method of emulating the control she so admires in Pavlova. Indeed, it is Holtby's reading of the Monte Carlo scene that satirises its mistaken

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<sup>36</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby Letters to Vera Brittain, 21 August 1928, fol. 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'A Letter from Var: Dancers and Inhibitions', *Yorkshire Post*, 24 August 1928, p.4.



beliefs in Freudian psychoanalysis and serves as a check to her readers not to follow suit. '[L]eisure' Holtby insists should be enjoyed with 'disciplined austerity' and not 'lounging idleness' and it seems that Holtby urges her readers to read in the manner of the 'dancer' rather than the 'pyjamed bathers of Monte Carlo'.

This attitude is also evident in Holtby's use of the romance plot in her novels. By subverting the conventional happy ending, she jolts the 'feminine middlebrow' reader out of her 'lounging idleness' and libertarian pursuit of sexual wish-fulfilment. The 'pleasurable excess' of the reader's identification is thereby disciplined and re-directed to intelligent questioning rather than emotional indulgence. When Holtby's novels undermine the marriage plot and the sexual wish-fulfilment of romantic union, it is the pervasive cultural influence of Freud and popularised concepts of instinct they reject. More precisely, it is a repudiation of the psychological attitudes derived from Freud which insisted every woman's first priority must be love, sex and ultimately maternity. Holtby expresses this most forcefully in her 1932 appraisal of Virginia Woolf:

at the very moment when an artist might have climbed out of the traditional limitations of the domestic obligation by claiming to be a human being, she was thrust back into them by the authority of the psychologist. A woman she was told, must enjoy the full cycle of sex-experience or she would become riddled with complexes like a rotting fruit.<sup>39</sup>

Holtby is determined to demonstrate that 'the full cycle of sex experience' does not have to be the first claim on a woman's life and that women who have professional and artistic priorities beyond the domestic are not 'riddled with complexes'. To achieve this through her spinster characters, Holtby must negotiate the 'pleasurable

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<sup>39</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978; first pub. 1932), p.29.



excess' that Humble identifies as part of the 'feminine middlebrow' reading experience and Brontë's association with it. Holtby cannot allow her readers to indulge in the romantic fantasies of marital union without calling them to task. She constantly strives to ensure a place for the self-assertion and autonomy of the unmarried career woman in her narratives. In *The Crowded Street* and *South Riding*, this entails the subversion of the Brontë romance plot. Holtby thereby forces readers to consider what the wider cultural and political repercussions might be for women who cannot, or refuse to, conform to the role of wife and mother. In this way Holtby, reveals the potential in Charlotte Brontë's novels to engender a critical reading experience as well as 'pleasurable excess' where, like Rebecca West, Charlotte Brontë also becomes something of a literary Pavlova.

Holtby's spinster headmistress, Sarah Burton, self-consciously sums up the author's demands on the romantic reader at the end of *South Riding*:

Don't let me catch any of you at any time loving anything without questions. Question everything – even what I am saying now. Especially perhaps what I say. Question everyone in authority and see that you get sensible answers to your questions. Then if the answers are sensible, obey the orders without protest. Question your government's policy, question the arms race, question the Kingsport slums, and the economics of feeding school children, and the rule that makes women have to renounce their jobs on marriage, and why the derelict areas still are derelict. This is a great country, and we are proud of it, and it means much that it is loveable. But questioning does not mean the end of loving, and loving does not mean the abnegation of intelligence. (SR, p.488)

Though admonishing her pupils here, Sarah also addresses Holtby's reader, overtly demanding that they question the world around them. Her areas of questioning combine pacifist, socialist and feminist concerns: armaments, deprived areas,



education, child welfare and the marriage bar. Her final line, though spoken in the context of patriotism, is also self-reflexive of Holtby's romance plot itself. If loving and intelligence are compatible, then perhaps it is also possible for the romantic reader to be a rational one. The implication is that the 'feminine middlebrow' reader should balance her pleasure in the text with intelligent questioning. The subverted Brontë romance plot is central to producing this reader perspective in Holtby's narrative. In the sections that follow, I explore how Holtby achieves this by exploiting the ambiguous status of Charlotte Brontë's novels in her own and the 'feminine middlebrow' imagination, poised between 'pleasurable excess' and 'disciplined austerity'. *The Crowded Street* and *South Riding* encourage the reader to identify with Holtby's spinster protagonists, who function as reincarnations and revisions of Charlotte Brontë's heroines. Yet, both novels also leave the reader questioning why that identification fails to fulfil their romantic expectations.



## Part 2

### *Shirley and The Crowded Street*

In Holtby's second novel, *The Crowded Street* (1924), Muriel Hammond is the eldest daughter of a tradesman's family. Her mother craves for social prestige and is desperate to gain social ground amongst the upper-middle classes by marrying off her daughters to eligible and wealthy bachelors. Godfrey Neale, Marshington's aristocrat in search of a wife, is the town's prize catch. Muriel spends much of the novel trying to live up to her mother's expectations and loving Godfrey from afar. Muriel's shy devotion to her family recalls other self-effacing early twentieth century spinster heroines such as the quiet and uneventful lives of Flora Mayor's Henrietta Symons and Mary Jocelyn or Sinclair's repressed and retiring Harriet Frean and the sublimating philosopher, Mary Olivier.<sup>40</sup> Yet, Muriel is ultimately a heroine who rebels against the social expectations of her mother's community. Clues to her eventual rebellion are offered via textual allusions to Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. Holtby's *The Crowded Street* therefore encourages the 'feminine middlebrow' reader to read interwar debates on women's roles, particularly the spinster's, through the eyes of Brontë's heroine, Caroline Helstone.

#### Muriel Hammond Reads *Shirley*

Muriel Hammond's acquaintance with *Shirley* is highlighted at a turning point in the novel. Her rebellious sister, Connie, has taken the marriage-obsessed principles

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<sup>40</sup> See Flora Mayor, *The Third Miss Symons*, pref. John Masefield and intro. Susan Hill (London: Virago, 1980; repr. 1993; first pub. 1913). Flora M. Mayor, *The Rector's Daughter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973; first pub. Hogarth Press, 1924). May Sinclair, *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (London: Virago, 1980; first pub. William Collins and Co, 1922). May Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (London: Virago, 1980; first pub. Macmillan, 1919).



of her mother's society too far, and become pregnant outside of wedlock, a fatal blow to their mother's ambitions for social respectability. Muriel is therefore depicted reading *Shirley* in a domestic scene fraught with tension:

She read, 'Of late years, I say, an abundant shower of curates had fallen upon the North of England, but in eighteen hundred eleven-twelve that affluent rain had not descended: there was no Pastoral Aid, no Additional Curates Society, to stretch out a helping hand to worn-out old rectors and incumbents, and give them the wherewithal to pay a vigorous young colleague from Oxford or Cambridge.'

Muriel was not interested in curates. She let *Shirley* fall unheeded on her lap, and sat again listening for the sound of her father's horse along the road or of Connie's footsteps in the bedroom overhead.<sup>41</sup>

The previous chapter of *The Crowded Street* had finished with the disastrous return of Connie, who, unlike Muriel had attempted to break free from Marshington society by signing up as a 'Land Girl' during the First World War. She has, however, returned ignominiously and is reluctant to marry the father of her child. Mr Hammond has been sent to the Todd family to convince them to let their son marry Connie and save her reputation. His enterprise is successful but at great cost. Connie goes to live on the Todd family farm with the father of her unborn child but she does not love the father and never lives to give birth to the child. After attempting suicide, she dies from pneumonia. *Shirley* appears a staid text in comparison to the Hammond family strife. As Muriel's attention wanders from her novel, she cannot foresee the tragedy in store for her sister and appears by comparison the epitome of middle-class feminine virtue, patient and unassuming.

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<sup>41</sup> Winifred Holtby, *The Crowded Street*, intro. Clare Hardisty (London: Virago, 1981; repr. 1987; first pub. John Lane, 1924), p.156. Page numbers hereafter denoted in the text by CS.



For Holtby's 'feminine middlebrow' reader this allusion to *Shirley* would have awakened associations between Muriel and Caroline Helstone, the self-effacing heroine of Brontë's novel, *Shirley*. Indeed, Holtby seems to indulge her reader by allowing Muriel Hammond to exhibit many of the same character traits as Caroline Helstone. The original title for Holtby's novel was 'The Wallflower'<sup>42</sup> and Muriel is for a great part of the narrative a wallflower, outwardly very much like Caroline. Brontë's heroine fades into the background at tea-parties, '[s]itting in the shade, without flowers or ornaments, her attire the modest muslin dress, colourless but for its narrow stripe of pale azure' (*Shirley*, p.249). Also clothed in 'a white dress' like Caroline (*Shirley*, p.313), Muriel Hammond remains largely unnoticed: '[h]er soft white dress faded into the white walls of the room' (CS, p.65). By contrast, Muriel's school-friend and flamboyant heart breaker, Clare Duquesne, has 'caught all light and colour from the room' (CS, p.69) with her 'wine-red' and 'vivid dress' (CS, p.65). Clare outshines Muriel just as the vivacious Shirley Keeldar 'in the rainbow scarf and purple dress amidst the throng of ladies' distracts from her friend Caroline (*Shirley*, p.312).

In *Shirley*, Caroline pines away for the love of the mill-owner, her cousin Robert Moore. Yet political quarrels between Moore and her Uncle the rector, her legal guardian, mean that she is forbidden to see the object of her desire. As the novel progresses she becomes convinced that she has lost his affections to her friend, the wealthy baroness, Shirley Keeldar. For a good part of *The Crowded Street*, Muriel echoes the lovelorn Caroline, pining for the love of the local aristocrat and estate owner, Godfrey Neale. Though she and Godfrey share a kiss just before he is sent off

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<sup>42</sup> Holtby refers to this novel as 'The Wallflower' during its composition in 1922. See Winifred Holtby to Vera Brittain, April 21 1922, *Selected Letters of Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain (1920-1935)* ed. Vera Brittain and Geoffrey Handley-Taylor and intro. Vera Brittain (London: A. Brown & Sons, 1960), p.20.



to war, his affections are quickly diverted to the showy singer, Clare Duquesne, just as Caroline fears Moore's have been diverted to Shirley. Even though she knows Godfrey's affections to be flighty, Muriel nevertheless clings to the hope that Godfrey will return to her and by proposing secure her status as a woman of Marshington society:

If he asked her to marry him, she would of course accept. It would be a splendid triumph, the end of her long years of waiting and feeling that she was a complete failure. It would be the consummation of her duty to her mother, of her success as a woman. (CS, p.118)

Yet Godfrey does not propose when Muriel expects him to. Instead, he proposes to Clare just as Caroline Helstone's Mr Robert Moore first proposes to Shirley. Muriel is left feeling that her womanhood is incomplete and that she is a social failure. Like Caroline, she fades away with ill-health and depression, though not as dramatically as her languishing Brontë predecessor. Caroline, in whose face 'all its paleness, all its change, all its forlorn meaning were clearly revealed' (*Shirley*, p.252), is plunged into feverish illness when her suspicions of a romance between Moore and Shirley are confirmed. Muriel's stunted dreams of romance are also manifest in her lack-lustre demeanour which 'combine[s] the boredom of distaste with the confusion of timidity' (CS, p.213). Her wan and dejected presence at tea-parties goes largely unnoticed until the local vicar is compelled to reflect, 'No girl of her age ought to look like that' (CS, p.213).

The reader's anxieties about Muriel's future are, however, mitigated by the allusion to *Shirley*. However self-effacing and tragic Muriel might seem, the reader is consoled by her knowledge of the Brontë plot and feels reassured that all will come



good in the end. The reader is seduced into feeling confident that whatever torments Muriel suffers in pining for Godfrey, she will follow the path of her Brontë counterpart and finally marry her beloved. After all, the reader knows that Robert Moore eventually proposes and Caroline accepts, even though she knows that he has already proposed to the wealthy Shirley for financial gain. Brontë winds up her narrative by marrying the rebellious Shirley off to her tutor, Louis Moore and Caroline to her long loved cousin, Robert Moore: the two friends married off to the two brothers. But the reader expecting such a neat romantic ending to Holtby's tale is sadly disappointed. At the end of *The Crowded Street*, Godfrey reveals to Muriel that Clare has broken off their engagement and proposes to Muriel instead. The reader expecting Muriel to follow the example of Caroline is shocked to find that Muriel rejects Godfrey's proposal outright. Bursting his aristocratic pride, Muriel bluntly informs Godfrey, 'I was once in love with you, but I don't love you' (CS, p.270).

On one level, the foiled romantic ending of *The Crowded Street* represents a striking departure from Brontë's romance plot in *Shirley*. Yet, on another, Holtby seems to retain the spirit of Brontë's novel and its critical interrogation of marriage. Throughout *The Crowded Street*, Muriel is haunted by the spectre of becoming an old maid, a spinster, but a series of revelations about the middle-class marriage values of her provincial town prompt a transformation in her character. Muriel begins to reject the institution of marriage as the only 'happy ending' to female existence. Her criticisms of marriage and challenges to the depressing fate of the spinster also recall Brontë's Caroline Helstone. *Shirley* therefore becomes an ambivalent spectral presence in *The Crowded Street*, pointing to both the conventional happy ending anticipated by the reader and the actual ending where personal autonomy is chosen over marriage. The novel ends by encouraging the reader to question why Muriel



turns away from marriage to run the risk of becoming an old maid. The tableau of Muriel with *Shirley* on her lap captures her looking up from her novel. Though her attention seems to have wandered from her book, this pose also symbolises her looking outwards from her 1849 novel into her 1920s world, perceiving the same flawed middle-class morality identified by her Brontë predecessor over seventy years before her. Ultimately, Holtby asks her ‘feminine middlebrow’ reader to mirror Muriel by looking outwards from her novel to the interwar debates around marriage and the spinster and view them through the eyes of Caroline Helstone.

### **The Fate of an ‘Old Maid’**

This chapter began by considering what Holtby calls the ‘Legend of the Frustrated Spinster’. Holtby believes it to have originated in the Protestant reformation. The abolition of convents, she argues, removed a legitimate outlet for the single woman and fostered the belief that female success ought to be judged solely on the ability to marry. According to Holtby, the reformation marks the point in history from which female virginity began to be associated with frustration and personal failure. ‘Catholics who could call themselves Brides of Christ had no cause for shame’, Holtby relates, ‘but Protestants who had been unable to win congratulations as brides of men were called “old maids” and foredoomed in folklore to “lead an ape in hell”’ (*Women*, p.127-8). In Holtby’s view, attitudes towards the unmarried woman had altered very little by the early twentieth century. Despite the progress made by the woman’s movement in proving that the unmarried woman could find personal success in education, politics and the professions, Holtby observes that many unmarried women of her generation are still ‘taught to pity themselves. From childhood they learn to dread the fate of an “old maid”’ (*Women*, p.132). Yet, Holtby is adamant that



the fate of the ‘old maid’ represents for the middle-class woman not simply the frustration of her sexual and procreative instinct but also the frustration of personal autonomy and of spiritual and intellectual development:

[T]he routine of ‘pleasure’ or ‘home life’ becomes increasingly exasperating. Nothing has been achieved; no purpose served; the bridge cards are shuffled and re-dealt; the tennis balls brought out or put away; the dance tunes change, but no new partners come. The sum of experience is negation, disappointment and monotony, frequently ending in invalidism, bitterness and neurasthenia. (*Women*, p.130)

*The Crowded Street* represents Holtby’s most extensive exploration of the spiritual and intellectual frustrations of the ‘old maid’.

The fate of the ‘old maid’ haunts Muriel Hammond from the earliest stages of her life. The novel’s prologue sets an ominous tone for Muriel’s future. Invited to a children’s party at the age of eleven, Muriel discovers that she does not have enough dance partners and flees to the supper-room in shame, where she is discovered ignominiously stealing sweets. Even from an early age, Muriel seems destined to be unsuccessful in securing partners. Even before she is thirty, Muriel is branded as ‘an old maid’ and a ‘spinster’. In her mid-twenties, she is taunted by younger girls for being ‘a thorough-going old maid, mean and spiteful’ (CS, p.140). Her mother faces marital and family troubles, not the least of which is ‘the spinsterhood of her daughters’ (CS, p.92). Muriel is forced to consider ‘the ten wasted years that lay behind her and her barren future’ (CS, p.140). As the novel progresses, even her Aunt Beatrice’s reassurances that she will one day marry fail to offer any comfort and Muriel rebuffs her aunt with the cynical question: ‘I’m nearly thirty. Nobody has ever proposed to me yet. Do you think that it’s likely?’ (CS, p.223).



Muriel's question to her aunt is a poignant moment in the narrative because Aunt Beatrice is the embodiment of Muriel's 'barren future' (CS, p.140). Mrs Hammond's spinster sister is introduced as an unloved and pitiful figure: '[s]eventeen years spent as the one unmarried daughter of a large family had taught Beatrice Bennet that she existed only upon other people's sufferance' (CS, p.24). Over the years, Beatrice has hovered on the margins and faded into the background of the Hammond family life such that she is 'ignored as completely as the carpet, crocheting doilies in the window' (CS, p.220). Beatrice is no inspirational forebear for Muriel but a woman worn down by the ideals of a society that she cannot repudiate. The only advice she can offer Muriel is to hope for marriage and, failing that, a short life:

I hope very sincerely, dear, I have always hoped that you would marry, both for your own sake and your mother's [. . .] But even more for your own sake, dear. You will marry, I'm sure. Marriage is the – crown and joy of woman's life – what we were born for – to have a husband and children and a little home of your own. Of course there are some of us to whom the Lord has not pleased to give this. I'm sure I'm not complaining. There may be many compensations, and of course He knows best. But – it's all right while you're young Muriel [. . .] It's when you grow old and the people who needed you are dead . . . I sometimes pray that the good Lord won't make me wait here very long – that I can die before everyone gets tired of me, and of having me staying round. (CS, pp.223-24)

Beatrice narrates her life in one paragraph: she has never married, has cared for her mother and now feels a burden on her sister's family. Hers is a tale of emptiness and dependency. Notably, there is no mention in Beatrice's 'many compensations' of a single woman training for an occupation and earning her own living. Confronting the dejected Beatrice is for Muriel to confront her own future. She faces the fact that



‘[s]he had abandoned all hope of a career to help her mother and her mother did not need her’ and further admits, ‘I’m like Aunt Beatrice, living in fear of an unloved old age . . . Oh, what am I going to do with myself?’ (CS, p.225).

This question that Muriel asks of herself is the same question posed by Caroline Helstone in *Shirley*. At the close of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, Brontë’s heroine had asked ‘the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve’ (*Shirley*, p.174), namely ‘What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?’ (*Shirley*, p.173). Muriel Hammond asks the same question in 1919 at the end of the First World War: a testimony to the enduring predicament of the middle-class unmarried woman. Both Muriel and Caroline live in middle-class worlds where the unmarried girl must occupy herself with socially respectable but stultifying philanthropy – Caroline with her work for the Jew basket and Muriel with her work at the local hospital. Both are desperate to find a more challenging use of their time: Caroline aspires to be a governess and Muriel is tempted to assist in reforming prostitutes at ‘St Catherine’s,’ the local home for ‘fallen sisters’ (CS, p.95). Both types of occupation are, however, deemed unsuitable for the unmarried heroine. Shirley and Mrs Pryor dissuade Caroline from taking up the demeaning position of governess and Muriel’s mother prohibits her work with ‘reformed prostitutes’ as unseemly and immoral (CS, p.217).

Holtby does not invoke these comparisons between Muriel and Caroline simply to console the reader that Muriel’s dilemma will be solved by a marriage proposal. *The Crowded Street* draws inspiration from Caroline Helstone’s critique of marriage in *Shirley* and in doing so casts doubt on the very sense of wish-fulfilment in the Brontë ending. Though dissuaded from taking up work as a governess, Caroline nevertheless remains discontented with her status as an unoccupied single woman,



dependent on her uncle. She begins to philosophise on the injustices of marriage and the plight of the old maid she feels destined to become:

Till lately I had reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence. I considered somehow as a matter of course, that I was growing up to the ordinary destiny, and never troubled myself to seek any other; but now, I perceive plainly, I may have been mistaken. Probably I shall be an old maid, I shall live to see Robert married to some one else, some rich lady: I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?<sup>43</sup>

She confides her thoughts on the travesty of the middle-class marriage system to Shirley, stressing her belief that middle-class women should be trained for professions and not just marriage: ‘I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts’ (*Shirley*, p.229). Shirley reminds her of the stereotypical prejudices against the spinster’s ugliness and unwomanliness - ‘hard labour and learned professions, they say, make women masculine, coarse, unwomanly’ (*Shirley*, p.229) – but Caroline discards this – ‘what does it signify, whether unmarried and never-to-be married women are unattractive and inelegant or not?’ (*Shirley*, p.230). Shirley is obliged to conclude, ‘[y]ou might be an old maid yourself, Caroline, you speak so earnestly’ (*Shirley*, p.230). Yet Caroline’s questions, ‘[w]hat was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world’ not only articulate the plight of the ‘old maid’ but also strike at the heart of bourgeois femininity, married and unmarried.

Muriel’s dilemma over how to fill her days continues Caroline Helstone’s criticism of marriage as a middle-class institution. Under the increased social and

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<sup>43</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: O.U.P., 1981; reiss. 1998; first pub. 1849), p.174.



economic opportunities for women to earn their own living in the 1920s, Muriel's objections lead her narrative towards a more radical ending. Rather than swallowing her misgivings and marrying, as both Caroline and Shirley do at the end of Brontë's novel, Muriel rejects the marriage proposal at the end of *The Crowded Street*. She realises that the middle-class society of Marshington cannot offer any solutions to the conundrum of what she will do with her life. It can only advocate marriage for women and, like Caroline before her, Muriel starts to view such an institution as inherently flawed:

She saw herself accepting new standards. The thing that mattered in Marshington was neither service nor love but marriage, marriage respectable and unequivocal, marriage financially sound, eugenically advisable and socially correct. (CS, p.226)

Muriel knows, however, from her own experiences that the institution of marriage is full of snobbery and hypocrisy. Mrs. Hammond's desperate attempts to hang onto social standing through her daughters' marriages hide the secret of her husband's adultery with the local barmaid, whilst Connie Hammond's failure to live up to the Marshington standards of womanhood drives her to illegitimate pregnancy and suicide.

Muriel, however, takes a long time to articulate her own discontent with her life as a provincial woman. Yet, Holtby introduces Caroline Helstone's objections to marriage and the fate of the 'old maid' earlier on in the novel via another female character: Delia Vaughan, the vicar's daughter. Delia, rather than Muriel, first emulates Caroline by introducing the critique of Marshington's marriage-obsessed society. She also rebels against the passive, domestic paragon of middle-class femininity and, like Brontë's Shirley, insists on arguing with men as their equal. An



ardent young feminist intellectual who leaves Marshington to study at Cambridge, Delia finally heads for London to make her name working for a feminist reform group. She outlines to Muriel the perils of striving to live up to the marriage ideals of Marshington early on in the novel:

Remember there's only one thing that counts for a girl in Marshington and that is sex success. Turn and twist how you will, it comes to that in the end. The whole of this sort of life is arranged around that one thing. Of course, it's an important thing, but it's not the only one. (CS, p.88)

Delia here seems to articulate Holtby's sentiments in her 1930 article, 'Too Much Talk of Romance', that there is more to life than finding a husband. This is not to suggest that Delia spurns romance, she has her own lover who is lost to her in the First World War and as she makes clear, 'it isn't marriage I object to – only marriage as an end of life in itself, as the ultimate goal of the female soul's development' (CS, p.230). Like Shirley, Delia admires Muriel for her intellect and recognises that she is different from the other Marshington girls. When quizzed as to the cause of Muriel's problems, Delia diagnoses, 'Wrong environment, intellectual idealist of limited capacity, not too much will power' (CS, p.229). Like her Brontë predecessor, Caroline, Muriel is intelligent: where Caroline was well read, Muriel is talented with sums and accounts. Yet, it takes Muriel some time before she recognises the truth in Delia's words for herself and realises her own potential to earn a living in a profession.

Ultimately, Delia guides Muriel towards solving the dilemma of how to fill her life. She forces Muriel to take responsibility for her own life choices: '[y]our life is your own, Muriel. [. . .] You may choose to look after your mother; you may



choose to pursue a so-called career, or you may choose to marry' (CS, p.232). Muriel reiterates Caroline Helstone's plea that 'single women should have more to do – better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now' (*Shirley*, p.390). She confides in Delia that 'It's having nothing to do, not having too much, which is intolerable' and implores '[b]ut if you'll give me work, show me some way of being useful' (CS, pp.236-7). The difference between Holtby's text and Brontë's is that where Caroline's plea is made to the 'Men of England!' (*Shirley*, p.392), Holtby's 1920s narrative depicts women able to help each other independently of men. Delia saves Muriel from the 'barren future' (CS, p.140) of the 'old maid', by offering her work in London as her housekeeper. Muriel takes it and travels to London to share a flat with Delia where she sets up home for the two of them. Gradually, however, she becomes interested in the impersonal issues of Delia's work for the 'Twentieth Century Reform League', 'a great society run by women [. . .] try[ing] to draw all classes into social service [. . .] or to carry out political propaganda for the purposes of forcing through social legislation' (CS, p.243). Naturally, Muriel's class-conscious mother sends recriminating letters, disapproving of Muriel's involvement in a feminist reform movement that strives to mix all classes of women together. As Humble has observed '[i]t is notable that the novel's feminism is precisely couched in terms of class and that its fantasy is a future in which women can unit across class divides' (Humble, p.92). Female liberation in *The Crowded Street* is also liberation from the confines of the middle-class. Muriel becomes a working woman, using her mathematical skills to do accounts for the League.

Through such work, she becomes transformed. Muriel's transformation is reflected in her style of dress – the wallflower frocks of white and grey are replaced by a 'blue dress of soft woollen stuff' (CS, p.245) and 'a charming mauve frock . . .



Everybody noticed it' (CS, p.260). 'Muriel Hammond of Miller's Rise', we learn 'had vanished; Miss Hammond of 53a Maple Street was a very different person' (CS, p.245). Through the development of Muriel Hammond's character, Holtby illustrates how the stereotypical fate of the 'old maid' can be refuted. Muriel does not follow the example of Aunt Beatrice and resign herself to hovering on the margins of the nuclear family. Instead, she ventures out into the professional world in a journey towards self-discovery and assertive autonomy. Moreover, *The Crowded Street* places the spotlight on the real frustrations of the middle-class woman, which, as Muriel herself tells Godfrey, are not resolved by marriage proposals and 'sex success' (CS, p.88). Marshington, she reveals, compounds women's frustrations rather than relieving them because it constricts women's horizons to finding a husband, to passive domesticity and class snobbery. Ultimately, Muriel surmises, it reduces women's lives to the pursuit of 'instinct':

Instinct you see is on the side of tradition. In every woman there must be so much nature - of her womanhood. Take from her all other outlet for vitality; strip her of other interests, and in some cases the instinct, reinforced by social influence, breaks down her control. (CS, p.268)

Muriel indicates that the single-minded pursuit of 'instinct' harms the middle-class woman and 'breaks down her control'. It produces personal and emotional frustration by 'strip[ping] her of other interests' beyond the home; Muriel's refusal of Godfrey's marriage proposal underlines the fact that both married and unmarried middle-class women are frustrated in this way. This is evident in the portrayal of Mrs Hammond's life, which is spent in exactly the same monotonous way as that of her unmarried daughters: sewing, socialising at parties, playing bridge and finding suitable



husbands. The novel therefore ends with Muriel not only refuting the ‘Legend of the Frustrated Spinster’ but also refuting the spiritual and intellectual frustrations of middle-class, provincial femininity, married or otherwise (*Women*, p.125).

### **‘Instinct’ and ‘Control’**

Muriel’s indictment of woman’s position in provincial middle-class society draws on the same concepts of ‘instinct’ and ‘control’ used by Holtby to describe the sexual promiscuity of the Monte Carlo clique in 1928. Though the settings are different – provincial Marshington’s staid, bourgeois snobbery is a far cry from the aristocratic hedonism of Monte Carlo – Holtby’s reading remains the same. The pursuit of ‘instinct’ over everything else - either to work off sexual complexes or find a husband - compromises self-control, producing more frustrations than it relieves. By subverting the traditional romantic ending in *The Crowded Street*, Holtby checks the reader’s desires for Muriel’s tale to end in marriage and sexual fulfilment. Denied the indulgence of losing her self-control, the ‘feminine middlebrow’ reader is thwarted in her identification with Muriel as a Brontë heroine destined to find romance. Instead, the reader is confronted with a different kind of romance as Muriel spirals into dizzy raptures over her aspirations for fulfilment through service. As she tells the bewildered Godfrey:

I’ve got an idea . . . An idea of service – not just vague and sentimental but translated into quite practical things. Maybe I’ll do nothing with it, but I do know this, that if I married you I’d have to give up every new thing that has made me a person. (CS, p.270)

By rejecting the socially approved mating ‘instinct’, Muriel assumes control of her life and her destiny. Muriel is not a heroine who waits to be made into a person



through marriage to the right man but one who strives for self-creation. She therefore rejects Godfrey's hand in marriage because it would undermine that ambition.

*The Crowded Street* opens the reader's eyes to the many types of frustration, spiritual, creative, intellectual, personal – as well as sexual. It also strives to broaden the concept of romance to include not only eligible suitors but also female attractions to service and vocation. It achieves this primarily by subverting the conventional romance plot. On one level, this is also achieved by subverting the ending of *Shirley*. Yet, the effect on the 'feminine middlebrow' reading experience is also perhaps to complicate the reader's assumptions about Brontë's ending. Though Caroline Helstone does eventually marry Robert Moore and avoids the fate of the 'old maid', Brontë's apparently 'happy ending' is still haunted by Caroline's questions, '[w]hat was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?' (*Shirley*, p.174). The prospect of becoming an 'old maid' may have stimulated Caroline's questions but it seems that marriage does not live up to its promise of answering them. Despite the double marriage ceremonies, the problematic quest for female self-knowledge and the search for a fulfilling occupation still cloud the ending of *Shirley*, an ending which Brontë, deliberately and ambiguously, hands over to the reader: 'I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions' (*Shirley*, p.646). Allusions to *Shirley* in *The Crowded Street* suggest that Holtby is one 'judicious reader' who finds the 'moral' of Brontë's tale in its feminist critique of marriage and spinsterhood. The insinuation is that Muriel Hammond is another such reader and the overriding hope is that the 'feminine middlebrow' reader will also become a 'judicious reader' both of Brontë's and Holtby's novel.



### Part 3

#### ***South Riding* and ‘The Memory of Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester’**

“Do you know you are trespassing?”

She spun round at the question, to face a big dark man on a big dark horse, towering above her from a bank of snow.

So startled was she that for a moment she could say nothing, aware only of the tossing black neck of the horse flecked by white foam, its white, rolling eyeballs, its black, gleaming, powerful flanks, and the dark eyes challenging her from the white face of the rider. It was as though some romantic sinister aspect of the snow-scene had taken heroic shape [. . .]

Into Sarah’s irreverent and well-educated mind flashed the memory of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester. (*SR*, pp.119-120)

This scene depicts an encounter between Holtby’s spinster schoolmistress heroine and the novel’s hero, the county squire, Robert Carne. Surprised by the sudden appearance of Carne on the scene, Sarah is confronted by his imperious question and domineering posture. There is something slightly formulaic about this scene, both in its language and setting. The child-like repetition of ‘a big dark man on a big dark horse’ and the stark black and white imagery suggest that the meaning of this tableau might be easily understood. In his domineering position, raised on a bank of snow and staring down from his horse, Carne appears the epitome of the romantic male hero, strong, silent and commanding. Sarah startled into speechlessness seems briefly to adopt the role of helpless, swooning female. She seems unsure whether Carne is real or whether he is a phantasm of her imagination. She quickly recovers, however, and her recollection of *Jane Eyre* is powerfully ironic: on one hand, she confirms the reader’s interpretation of this scene as romantic tableau but on the other,



her 'irreverent and well-educated' allusion defies the passive surrender to romantic feeling. It denies the reader's escapism by self-consciously drawing attention to the formation of fantasy and the act of reading itself.

This episode begins the romance narrative of *South Riding*. The implication is that the reader shares Sarah's 'irreverent and well-educated' response and that we will make the associations between Carne on his horse and Mr. Rochester. Though this is not Sarah and Carne's first meeting, we are reminded of Jane and Rochester's first encounter, where Jane is faced by a cantankerous Rochester who has fallen from his horse after slipping on a sheet of ice. The same stark black and white imagery pervades both Holtby's and Brontë's scenes. Holtby, however, offers some important divergences. Jane physically helps Rochester back to his horse, a precedent for how she will offer him physical care at the end of the novel when he is maimed and blinded. For Sarah, however, there is no such symbolic levelling of class and gender hierarchies. Carne remains on his horse looking down at her, accusing her of shortsightedly allowing her pupils to rampage over his land in the snow. For Jane, her encounter with the then unknown Rochester, is 'an incident of no moment, no romance, no interest in a sense' (*JE*, p.115). For Sarah, as for Holtby's reader, the very allusion to *Jane Eyre* invests the incident with romantic significance. At the approach of his daughter, Sarah sees Carne's face 'illuminated by the smile which had won his wife, chained Mrs. Beddows and given Carne of Maythorpe a reputation for popularity' (*SR*, p.120). Though Carne and Sarah leave the scene as 'antagonists', the reader is assured that Sarah has had a sudden change of heart. Sarah reasons that the smile was 'only a physical accident' but the narrator intimates to the knowledgeable reader that 'it had had its effect' (*SR*, p, p.120).



Holtby's textual allusion to *Jane Eyre* here looks in two directions at once. In the first instance, it is a friendly wink to the reader, indicating a shared realm of cultural fantasy. *Jane Eyre* is often regarded as a precursor to modern mass-market romances<sup>44</sup> and *South Riding* was published in an era that gave birth to romantic 'best-sellers' like E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919), Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* (1924) and Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (1924).<sup>45</sup> In this section, I investigate how Holtby relates the *Jane Eyre* romance plot of *South Riding* to the prevailing discourses around sexual division between the wars. Through this, Holtby constructs her spinster protagonist as both a romantic heroine and a rational antagonist who must negotiate her way in a world of tumultuous and destructive sexual passion.

### The Governess Complex

Sarah, as the opening quote to this section reveals, is deliberately set up as a *Jane Eyre* paragon. Like the orphan Jane who is 'poor, obscure, plain and little' (*JE*, p.276), Sarah too has lost both parents and faces the world as '[a] schoolmistress of forty, ugly, clumsy, vulgar, not a lady' (*SR*, p.396) and derided as 'plain, red-headed' (*SR*, p.60). Like Jane, she must use her intelligence and not her good looks to secure herself a living as a teacher. Though she teaches at the local high school for girls, her role as the teacher of Midge Carne, the county squire's wayward and eccentric daughter, echoes *Jane Eyre*'s role of governess. Sarah is charged with the task of keeping Midge, 'normal' and diverting her from her mother's aristocratic heritage of blue-blooded insanity. Midge therefore becomes another aristocratic Adela. Intimately connected to this lies the romance plot between the governess and her aristocratic employer. Though Sarah is not directly employed by Robert Carne, he is on the board

<sup>44</sup> Tania Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance* (London: Routledge, 1982), p.15.

<sup>45</sup> See Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp.45-46.



of school governors that interviews and approves her for the job, and as such she is set up in the reader's imagination as a twentieth century reincarnation of the Jane Eyre governess figure.

This Brontë heritage of the governess was, however, a difficult burden for the spinster of the interwar period. In *Motherhood and Its Enemies* (1927), Charlotte Haldane, wife of the Biologist J. B. S. Haldane and a scientist herself, proclaimed her admiration for the governesses of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. She commemorates Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Brontë as exemplary women in their role of governess and praises Brontë for her 'revolutionary yet unbeautiful protagonist' in *Jane Eyre* (Haldane, pp.104-106). Such women, Haldane argues had been inspirational to the suffragettes. Yet, this is where Haldane's admiration for the revolutionary single women of feminist history ends. As far as Haldane is concerned, the spinster governess and the spinster teacher had had their day. In her feminist treatise arguing for female sexual liberation, *Hypatia or Woman and Knowledge*, Dora Russell shares Haldane's view on the celibate spinster. Like Haldane, Russell acknowledges her debt to previous generations of feminists who remained celibate but contends that this political choice to abstain from heterosexual relations remains outdated in the interwar climate. 'They, these pioneers, childless, unwed,' Russell admits, 'created and bore thousands of women, made them anew, body and soul, for lives of mental and physical activity unknown in the past to any but the very exceptional few'.<sup>46</sup> According to Russell, previous feminists secured their demands for women's education by denying their femininity: they 'dared not cry out that women had bodies' (Russell, p.21). Russell maintains, however, that such a feminist

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<sup>46</sup> Dora Russell, *Hypatia of Woman and Knowledge* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), p.11.



sexual politics belongs to the past and declares that in the 1920s, 'the important task of modern feminism is to accept and proclaim sex' (Russell, pp.24-25).

As far as female sexual liberation and maternity are concerned, the claims of Russell and Haldane might seem progressive. Yet, their demands proclaimed progress for wives and mothers on one hand and, on the other, made the virginal spinster into a scapegoat. During the interwar years, the figure of the spinster became a locus for social and political concerns about racial decline, deviant sexuality and psychological pathology. As Haldane's title, *Motherhood and Its Enemies* suggests, Haldane regarded the spinster as an enemy to advancements in maternity and child-care between the wars:

The spinster has won her present recognition largely at the expense of the potential or actual mother [. . .] her growing economic and political status constitutes a definite menace to the future of motherhood. (Haldane, p.108)

As far as Haldane is concerned virgins are only useful to society as long as they keep close to the 'normal' female type: 'We are revising all our opinions on the value of virginity', she surmises, 'economic, social, political or religious'.<sup>47</sup> Haldane identifies amongst spinsters what she termed the 'intersex type'; the more they gravitate towards the 'intersex' type, the more prone spinsters became to mental instability and lesbianism. The 'intersex' woman - 'manly', 'mannish', 'unfeminine' (Haldane, p.146) – disregards her feminine attributes by refusing to dress in a feminine manner so that 'finally it atrophies her sex life' (Haldane, p.149). Such virginal women are unfulfilled which, in Haldane's estimation, atrophies their sexual organs, causing male secondary sexual characteristics to appear (Haldane, p.154). Haldane believes

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<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Haldane, *Motherhood and its Enemies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p.154.



the feminist movement and the teaching profession are rife with such masculinised women (Haldane, p.155). Haldane is especially wary of spinster teachers, viewing the ‘intersex’ teacher as a homosexual type who preys upon young girls (Haldane, p.153). This was an increasingly prevalent stereotype in fiction in the early twentieth century. D. H. Lawrence’s ‘ugly, clayey’ Miss Winifred Inger in *The Rainbow* and Woolf’s disparaging portrayal of the man-hating Miss Kilman in *Mrs Dalloway* are just two examples.<sup>48</sup>

Some of the most vicious attacks on the virginal spinster teacher came from proto-fascist thinkers such as Anthony M. Ludovici: a social theorist with leanings towards eugenics and the extreme right. He charges spinsters with the crime of racial decline and insists that ‘their increase is one of the surest indications we possess of the declining vitality of our race’ (*A Vindication of Woman*, p.263). This is, of course, an absurd charge given the literal impossibility for every woman to marry in the demographic aftermath of the First World War. In 1921, for every 100 men there were 114.2 women and this had increased from 108 in 1911.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, Ludovici supported his claims with reference to the spinster’s perceived psychosexual status, between the wars. Reviewing Holtby’s *Women and a Changing Civilisation* in 1934, Ludovici took particular exception to Holtby’s defence of the spinster, rebuking Holtby with the claim that ‘all the feminists and Platonists in Christendom cannot make a spinster a normal human being’.<sup>50</sup> In his view:

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<sup>48</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996; first pub. 1915), p.324. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996; first pub. 1925), pp.136-137.

<sup>49</sup> Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf, 1984), p.3.

<sup>50</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Anthony M. Ludovici, ‘Women and Socrates’, *New English Weekly*, 20 December 1934, WH/4/4.12/01m



The reason why it has become a tradition and a perfectly wise tradition among mankind to regard the spinster as frustrated, is that woman is physically different from man. [. . .] *‘the sexual functions of women are incomplete without gestation, parturition and lactation, which are the essential later stages of a cycle in which sexual intercourse is only the first incident [Italics in original].*<sup>51</sup>

In his copious study on the place of women in interwar society, *Woman: A Vindication*, he pursues his diatribe against the spinster at length:

The spinsters of any country represent a body of human beings who are not leading natural lives, and whose fundamental instincts are able to find no normal expression or satisfaction [. . .] the influence of the body of spinsters on the life of the nation to which they belong must be abnormal and therefore contrary to the normal needs and natural development of the nation.<sup>52</sup>

Ludovici’s invective divides spinsters into two categories: the positive spinster who has ‘natural instincts’ towards motherhood but no outlet for them and the negative spinster, whose sexual instincts are so low that she does not suffer in her virginity. Naturally, in Ludovici’s eugenicist argument the ‘negative spinster’ is the worst. In his view, a spinster’s virginity goes hand in hand with mental illness:

The discharge of sexual energy along nervous channels may lead to every variety of neuropathic symptoms: phobias, obsessions, melancholia, morbid self-contempt, or morbid self-esteem (narcissism), facial tics, other spasms, insomnia, vicious secret habits and hallucinations. (*Woman: A Vindication*, p.239)

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid*

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Ludovici, *Woman: A Vindication* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1923), p.231.



Ludovici's understanding of how 'sexual energy' becomes diverted to detrimental effect is a distorted version of Freud's concept of sublimation. Freud argued that civilisation was built on the sublimation of the sexual drives and that it could produce positive activities such as artistic creation.<sup>53</sup> During the interwar years, however, the distinction between sublimation and repression became blurred within British psychology and in the popular reception of psychoanalysis.<sup>54</sup> This produced accounts like Ludovici's where sublimation was pathological rather than beneficial. For Ludovici, the spinster's sexual pathology rendered her especially unfit to teach children since her 'unconscious' motives will be to exert power over the young and serve to induce 'sexual precocity or a distorted view of life' in their pupils, especially girls (*A Vindication of Woman*, p.241).

*South Riding's* spinster schoolmistress, Sarah Burton, must therefore contend with myriad forms of anti-spinster prejudice, both within and outside the novel. *Jane Eyre's* legacy in the guise of the governess is one fraught with personal conflict and public disapproval. Anti-spinster prejudice in the novel is voiced through the thoughts of Sarah Burton's second mistress, a woman who flatters herself that she did not compete for Sarah's position as headmistress because she is securely affianced. As such, she feels she has 'a complete alibi in all charges of frustration and virginity' (*SR*, p.248) and views Sarah with caustic superiority as a result:

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<sup>53</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1977), VII, 31-169 (p.163).

<sup>54</sup> This is probably derived from Freud's slippery definition of sublimation in his 1908 essay where it seems to become elided with repression. See Sigmund Freud, '“Civilised” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness' (1908) in *Civilization, Society and Religion*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.29-55 (p.45). This confusion between sublimation and repression is compounded by Havelock Ellis' consideration of Freud's essay in Havelock Ellis, 'Sex in Relation to Society' in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 7 vols, (New York: Random House, 1897-1928), VI (1928), 179. Other British psychologists debated the difference between sublimation and repression throughout the interwar period. See Edward Glover, 'Sublimation, Substitution and Social Anxiety', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 12:3, July 1931, 263-297 (p.284-85) and J.C. Flugel, 'Sublimation: Its Nature and Conditions', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 12:1, 1941-43 (1942), 10-25.



Miss Dolores Jameson looked at Sarah Burton's red hair bent over her time-tables and smiled indulgently. 'These spinster school-marms,' she thought. 'No wonder they stick to their job.' (*SR*, p.60)

Through Dolores' eyes, Sarah Burton is 'Plain, red-headed, managing. A typical school-marm' (*SR*, p.60). Dolores also presumes her to be a stereotypical 'man-hater' (*SR*, p.62). As Holtby's allusion to 'the memory of Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester' (*SR*, p.120) later reveals, however, Sarah is not a 'man-hater' but a woman who 'had a habit, inconvenient in head mistresses, of falling in love misguidedly and often' (*SR*, p.48). Sarah does not conform to the spinster stereotypes sneered at by Haldane and Ludovici. Instead of being the frigid, man-hating celibate that critics suppose, Sarah transpires to be a passionate and romantic woman: '[s]he had been engaged to marry three men' (*SR*, p.48) and 'knew herself to be desirable and desired, withheld only from marriage by the bars of death or principle' (*SR*, p.49). We learn that Sarah lost her first fiancé in the First World War, left her second, a South African farmer, over a disagreement on the race question and left her third, a Socialist member of Parliament over her feminist refusal to leave her job (*SR*, pp.48-9). Aware of the prejudices against spinster schoolmistresses like herself, Sarah openly repudiates Dolores' stereotypical presumptions and the quasi-scientific writings like those of Ludovici and Haldane on which such presumptions are based: 'I know you have odd theories about middle-age and virginity Miss Jameson. They don't convince me' (*SR*, p.248). Miss Parsons, the school's spinster matron, also falls prey to Dolores Jameson's discrimination and her description of her prejudiced colleague might readily refer to prevailing public opinion in the interwar decades:



She's always sneering at unmarried women. She seems to think that either we all envy her her wretched little fiancé, or that we're frozen and inhuman and all riddled with complexes. (SR, p.251)

Sarah Burton consoles her school matron by dismissing the anti-spinster propaganda that fuels Dolores Jameson's prejudice:

There's too much fuss about virginity and its opposite altogether. And I think that Miss Jameson may have been reading too many of those rather silly books that profess to serve up potted psychology. (SR, p.251)

Haldane's *Motherhood and Its Enemies* and Ludovici's *Woman: A Vindication* are just two prime examples of what Sarah Burton defines as 'potted psychology'.

Sarah's associations with the *Jane Eyre* romance plot strengthen her rejection of the spinster-stereotype by casting her as a romantic heroine. Yet, such manoeuvres did not always preserve the spinster teacher or governess from presumptions of frustrated virginity and insanity in the 'feminine middlebrow' reader's imagination. As Nicola Humble has noted, the Brontës often surfaced in the 'middlebrow' genre as a site of eccentricity and insanity in their own right. Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) is a perfect example of this. Gibbon's heroine, Flora Poste, deciding to live with estranged relatives who own a farm on the Yorkshire moors, finds herself in a disorganised and idiosyncratic Brontë world. It has its fiery preacher, its Heathcliffe-like womanisers, its mad Bertha Mason figure and a wildly poetic Cathy paragon. In this comic 'middlebrow' novel, Flora becomes the rational Austen figure intent on straightening out the muddled Brontë world. As she makes clear, 'I think I have very much in common with Miss Austen. She liked everything to be tidy,



pleasant and comfortable around her and so do I'.<sup>55</sup> Another example of how the Brontës functioned as a locus for eccentricity in the 'feminine middlebrow' novel is Rachel Ferguson's comic fantasy, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931). This is an intriguing novel to compare with Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), not least because it represents the interwar governess in the light of the interwar Brontë myth but also because its eccentric Brontë-esque family, like Holtby's, are called Carne. It is therefore possible that in naming her 'Rochester' figure, Robert Carne, Holtby might have played into the 'feminine middlebrow' love of intertextuality with this subtle allusion to Ferguson's novel.

In *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931), the Brontës figure as a shared fantasy of the eccentric upper middle-class Carne family. The story takes place around three sisters, their mother, governesses and various eclectic imaginary characters. In Ferguson's novel, the Carne family appoint a succession of governesses to educate the youngest sister Sheil but each governess finds the task impossible because of the family's obsessive imaginary life. The Carnes imagine they are close acquaintances of a pierrot performer, a high court judge, and their doll 'Ironface' is endowed with the character of a French highbrow. All of these imaginary characters attend dinner and exchange birthday and Christmas presents with the family. After a family trip to Yorkshire, where the family decide to 'tableturn' in order to communicate with the deceased Brontë sisters, the Brontës figure more vividly in the Carnes' fantasy family life. Surreally, the Brontë sisters speak back to the Carnes, promising to visit them. This later terrifies the youngest member of the Carne family, Sheil, who starts to imagine that the Brontë sisters are ghosts, haunting the family. To overcome her terrors, the family decide to integrate the Brontës more fully into their

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<sup>55</sup> Stella Gibbon, *Cold Comfort Farm* (London: Penguin, 1938; first pub. 1932), p.20.



interwar world and the Brontës are finally rendered ordinary by fantasising them shopping at Woolworths:

Lady Toddington said, "I saw the Brontës, yesterday."

Miss Ainslie closed her mouth. Deirdre said, "Where?"

"In Woolworths." Lady Toddington kissed the top of Sheil's head.<sup>56</sup>

The eldest sister, Deirdre, embellishes on this, describing the Brontës as buying 'writing pads. And Charlotte bought a hair-net. Mauve. Emily had one of her difficult fits right in the middle of the haberdashery' (*BWW*, p.253).

The real difficulty for the governess figure in Ferguson's novel is that she is both excluded from the family's fantasy life and inextricably part of it because she is identified with the Brontë sisters. This is particularly so after Sheil reads Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and discovers that both the Brontë sisters were governesses. Sheil then begins to confuse the family's governess with the Brontë sisters and becomes terrified that the dead have returned to haunt them. The governess, Miss Martin, tries in vain to curb Sheil's wild imagination against the encouragement of her sisters and mother but the Carne's fantasies succeed only in driving her to distraction. After almost striking Deirdre in frustration, Miss Martin is accused of losing her sanity:

"Miss Martin, you must be crazy."

Her pale eyes became terrified. "Don't say that! If I were, it's you – all of you . . . I

sometimes think you're all strange. (Ferguson, *BWW*, p.180)

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<sup>56</sup> Rachel Fergusons, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (London: Virago, 1988; repr.1989; first pub. 1931), p.252. Further page references hereafter denoted in the main text as *BWW*.



Sheil begins to imagine that her governess is Charlotte Brontë and that the cantankerous Emily Brontë visits her at night. Finally, Miss Martin is forced to admit defeat as far as educating Sheil is concerned and resigns her post as governess to become a secretary. The sisters are not sorry to see her leave and their attitudes towards her are coloured by the anti-spinster prejudices of the period, supposing her insane and sex-starved:

Poor old Martin! She was *the* original bromide wasn't she? I think if someone would quite firmly and politely seduce her she'd feel lots better. (Ferguson, *BWW*, p.218)

Another governess, Miss Ainslie, is appointed but though she is keen to enter into the family's fantasy life in order to educate Sheil, she is excluded and relegated behind the imaginary presence of 'Charlotte and Emily' (Ferguson, *BWW*, p.255). *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* privileges the Brontë obsession as an eccentric and comedic middle-class fantasy. Ferguson portrays the governesses sympathetically and we learn that both are obliged to take up their posts with the Carne family because they have dependents. Their poverty and lower middle-class status place them on the margins of the Carne family circle whilst their identity and influence are effaced by the memory of the Brontë governess figure. Neither of the governesses can get close enough to the family to educate them away from their Brontë obsession and their very attempts to educate and control Sheil ironically leave them, rather than the Carnes, vulnerable to charges of insanity.

In Holtby's *South Riding*, Sarah Burton must also act as governess to another Carne family. Holtby's Carnes, however are aristocratic rather than middle-class but like Ferguson's Carne family, they are bedevilled by eccentricity, though their insanity is much more tragic than comic. In Holtby's tale, Sarah Burton's role as the



Brontë governess figure is intended to serve the same purpose: to educate the eccentric family's child. Sarah's role as educator to Carne's daughter, Midge, is paramount to the family's future. Prone to neurotic outbursts, Midge enters the novel ricocheting around the dilapidated Maythorpe country house, conscious that she must pray and perform 'devoirs' to 'propitiate destiny' and avert 'the stern inimical force of fate brood[ing] over the house' (SR, p.18). Her fate is to follow her mother's footsteps into the sanatoria, to wear out her days as 'a wild, shrinking, tragic creature' (SR, p.44). After she dresses up in her mother's highwayman's costume and exhibits the same hysterical outburst, her father realises she must be sent to school 'to keep her normal' (SR, p.28). Initially, Sarah is introduced into the plot as a potentially alternative mother figure for Midge. As one of the school governors, Carne is responsible for selecting a new school headmistress and is the only one on the board to vote against Sarah. He wants a 'nice, motherly woman', 'a lady', to be appointed to 'help him to solve his domestic problem' (SR, p.28-9). Instead of the 'big motherly bosom on which a little girl could cry', Carne disapprovingly observes that Sarah's 'bosom was flat and bony as a boy's' (SR, p.29). Despite Carne's reservations, however, Sarah does not conform to the spinster schoolmistress stereotypes of what Charlotte Haldane describes as neurotic 'intersex' women. She is a well-educated and level-headed woman, and, unlike Ferguson's governesses, she exerts some beneficial influence over her protégée. Sarah is capable of commanding authority over Midge's hysterical outbursts. Midge idolises her as her 'Scarlet Sally' and inspires her school-friends to 'share her admiration of Miss Burton' (SR, p.198). In addition, Sarah's nonsense approach teaches Midge some semblance of control: '[h]er quiet voice, her assumption that Midge was really a reasonable being, had their accustomed effect. Midge controlled herself' (SR, p.201).



The success of Sarah Burton as both a positive portrayal of spinsterhood and a Jane Eyre paragon lies in the process of ‘othering’ that Holtby’s novel adapts from Brontë’s. In interwar culture, the spinster was often made the ‘other’ to the sexually active woman, wife and mother and became the antiquated, neurotic prude of the popular imagination. In *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, the governess figure is divested of authority, even though she represents education and rational control. She becomes the ‘other’ to the Carne’s upper-middle-class femininity, marginalized and ridiculed for being lower middle-class and strait-laced. By contrast, *South Riding*, like *Jane Eyre*, sets the governess figure as the standard by which other women are ‘othered’. As in *Jane Eyre*, *South Riding* achieves this process of ‘othering’ through a complex negotiation of femininity and class difference. Ultimately, it reverses the status quo by figuring the wife and mother as insane and hysterical rather than the spinster.

### **Bertha Mason and the Neurotic ‘Lady’**

In *Jane Eyre*, as Cora Kaplan has observed, Jane’s rational subjectivity as an equal human being is secured by Bertha Mason’s status as the aristocratic, colonial and hysterical ‘other’ and by the ‘otherness’ of the working-class servant woman, Grace Poole.<sup>57</sup> In *South Riding*, Sarah’s rationality and common-sense are similarly predicated on her difference from Carne’s ‘tempestuous’ and wildly insane aristocratic wife, Muriel (SR, p.409). Through this, Holtby succeeds in reversing the binary opposition between wife / mother and spinster central to anti-spinster attitudes between the wars. Instead of the spinster headmistress, it is Muriel, the wife and

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<sup>57</sup> Cora Kaplan, ‘Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism’, in *Seachanges: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp.147-176 (p.168; pp.173-4).



mother confined to the home, one of Mosley's 'women who are women' (Mosley, p.54), who becomes tragically insane.

Muriel Carne is a composite echo of Brontë's Blanche Ingram and Bertha Mason, being both beautiful and insane. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane compares herself unfavourably with Blanche, a supposed rival for Rochester's affections, by drawing comparable portraits of them both (*JE*, p.181). She also sees Bertha's 'savage', 'discoloured' reflection in her own mirror (*JE*, p.283) and Rochester compares the differences between the two women: '[c]ompare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask – this form with that bulk' (*JE*, p.294). Sarah too is confronted by an image of the 'other' woman when her curiosity unveils a portrait of the aristocratic Muriel Carne (née Sedgmire) immortalising her 'wild unstable loveliness', at once 'beautiful', 'flawless' and 'imperious' (*SR*, p.167). Like Jane, Sarah berates herself for her own physical imperfections: '[s]he compared herself with the portrait of Muriel Sedgmire, lacerating herself with his wife's beauty' (*SR*, p.396). Yet, Sarah's plainness next to Muriel, like Jane's physical differences from both Bertha and Blanche, secure the heroine's status as a rational woman of intellect and independent means.

Holtby's novel follows *Jane Eyre* by underlining the class differences between the women. Bertha and Muriel are both aristocrats struck down by inherited lunacy, exacerbated by a life of luxury and leisure. Jane Eyre and Sarah Burton's distance from their insane female counterparts lies in their status as lower-middle class working women. We are constantly reminded in descriptions of Sarah that she is a blacksmith's daughter and not an upper class 'lady'. Tormented by her inability to win Carne's affections, Sarah pictures herself as '[a] schoolmistress of forty, ugly, clumsy, vulgar, not a lady' (*SR*, p.396) and 'a little common' (*SR*, p.257). Carne also



makes these class judgements of her, deciding that ‘Miss Burton was neither gentle, nor a lady’ (SR, p.29). Such class distinctions work in Holtby’s narrative to re-define the aristocratic wife as the victim of frustration rather than the spinster schoolmistress. As we saw in *The Crowded Street*, Holtby is keen to demonstrate that a life of domestic leisure is much more likely to cause damaging frustrations than the hard-working, financially independent life of the single woman. Defending the spinster and her work in *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby maintains that by contrast the futile life of the leisured lady poses a greater cause for concern:

The elegant ladies wandering aimlessly from one resort to another, one luxury hotel to another, finding Antibes as dull as Cowes, baccarat as dull as roulette, Jules as dull as Stephen, heroin as dull as absinthe, and Lesbianism as dull as maternity, are frustrated in their needs for ecstasy, power and devotion. Nursing-homes and sanatoria are filled with neurotics who have worn themselves out vainly seeking physical cures for a spiritual disease. (*Women*, p.130)

In 1934, Holtby criticises the tradition of the ‘leisured lady’ in an article entitled, ‘We Cannot Afford the Ladies’, insisting ‘that the Show-Ring of Mayfair leads to boredom, frustration and futility’ and ‘minimises the value of everything that a woman does that is disassociated from that single function’, namely ‘sex victory’.<sup>58</sup> Holtby is forced to conclude: ‘[w]e cannot afford to keep among us a set of people who, being unhappy themselves, are not a cause of happiness to others. Let us abolish them, by turning their daughters into ordinary working women and natural human beings’.<sup>59</sup> Sarah Burton is undoubtedly one of the ‘ordinary working women’ who earns her living through her intellect rather than her sexuality and her status amongst

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<sup>58</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, ‘We Cannot Afford the Ladies’, December 1934, *Quiver*, WH/2/2.18/01a-01f.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*



‘natural human beings’ is secured as such. It is also her duty in the novel to educate Muriel’s hysterical daughter Midge into becoming ‘an ordinary working woman’ rather than following in her mother’s footsteps.

Yet the romance plot between Sarah and Carne threatens to elide the differences between Muriel and Sarah. Though Sarah is at first hostile to Muriel because of class differences, she becomes increasingly sympathetic. When Sarah holds the candle up to Muriel’s portrait at Maythorpe, she has a callous bulletin of the Carne scandal in her mind – ‘Miss Sedgmire. A hunting beauty. Shut away. Insane’ (SR, p.167) – but this changes once the portrait is illuminated. Sarah is shocked into sympathy: ‘[S]he no longer found it amusing that a farmer who had married this baron’s daughter should be striving to maintain against ruin and failure the dignity he thought suitable to his wife’s position, though she was shut away in a mental hospital’ (SR, p.168). However cruel the adulterous and hedonistic Muriel may have been to her devoted county squire, she retains the overriding persona of a victim, helpless before her genetic mental instability, her wayward passions and social stigma. The sympathy Holtby elicits for Muriel marries her text more closely to Brontë’s. The tragedy of Robert Carne and Muriel’s marriage recalls Rochester and Bertha. Carne is like Rochester in having married a woman of great wealth and Muriel is like Bertha, seemingly doomed to hereditary insanity and locked away from society. Sarah seems like another Jane, destined to replace Muriel by becoming the next potential Mrs. Carne.

*South Riding* was not the only 1930s novel to re-enact this process of feminine ‘othering’ via class and psychosexual status using the *Jane Eyre* plot. Daphne du Maurier achieved the same effect in her romantic-crime novel, *Rebecca*, published two years after *South Riding* in 1938. The romance between du Maurier’s young girl



and the forty-two year old Maxim de Winter also recalls the Jane and Rochester romance with self-conscious irony. Du Maurier, like Holtby, steered away from the cheap wish-fulfilment of low-brow interwar romance novels. *Rebecca* therefore also seeks to offer the reader the pleasure of the text and rational detachment and Alison Light has remarked on how du Maurier achieves this by ‘taking the reader over the familiar and the more noticeably *literary* past’.<sup>60</sup> According to Light, ‘[t]he romantic writing which du Maurier herself acknowledged was not that which was shaping into a “genre” between the wars, but that of the nineteenth-century novel. She was the first to admit a lifelong debt to the Brontës and her self-conscious reshaping of their imaginative terrain’ (Light, p.164). In du Maurier’s novel, the Bertha Mason figure is the ghost of Maxim de Winter’s first wife, Rebecca, whose eccentric and domineering influence haunts the narrative and subjectivity of de Winter’s second wife. De Winter’s second wife partially resembles Jane and Sarah Burton in that she is lower middle-class and has been compelled to ‘work for a salary’ as a lady’s companion before marrying Maxim de Winter.<sup>61</sup> Once married and living at de Winter’s stately home of Manderley, however, she feels that there is ‘Rebecca, always Rebecca [. . .] she haunted me’ (*Rebecca*, p.244). Having given up her occupation on marriage, the girl finds herself increasingly compared to the former mistress of Manderley and her identity slides increasingly into that of the mysterious Rebecca. So overwhelmed is she by the brooding presence of Rebecca at the Manderley estate that her name is never disclosed to the reader. Rebecca is, as Light outlines, ‘no longer “out there”, the

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<sup>60</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.165.

<sup>61</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Pan Books, 1975; first pub. 1938), p.55.



wife in the attic of the Gothic text, but *inside* the female subject, the condition of its existence'.<sup>62</sup>

Light's allusion to Gilbert and Gubar's, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, suggests their reading of Bertha as the Gothic double of Jane Eyre might also be applied to 1930s novels like *Rebecca* and *South Riding*. For Gilbert and Gubar, 'Bertha [. . .] is Jane's truest and darkest double, she is the angry aspect of the orphan child' and as such she acts out the feminine rebellion against male dominance that Jane cannot.<sup>63</sup> Rebecca and Muriel can also be read to some extent as the rebellious doubles of the second Mrs de Winter and Sarah Burton. Rebecca, Muriel and Bertha all protest against conventional feminine roles. The former 'tall, dark and majestic' Bertha was, as Rochester relates, a wife at once intemperate and unchaste' (*JE*, pp.305-6). Du Maurier's Rebecca is likewise revealed as a cunning femme fatale who seduces other women's husbands and workmen but outwardly retains her aristocratic propriety as lady of the house. She was 'the most beautiful creature [. . .] ever seen' and skilled at hunting and sailing (*Rebecca*, p.243). Similarly, Holtby's Muriel Carne is reputedly proud, self-willed and promiscuous - 'she rode like a wild cat, danced like a bacchante, and took her own wild way from Maythorpe to Mayfair, from Paris to Vienna, from Monte-Carlo to Baden-Baden' (*SR*, p.410). Not only this but Muriel relishes life beyond the domestic confines of conventional femininity. Like Rebecca, she loves to hunt and as we learn, 'she never had "nerves" in the hunting season' (*SR*, p.76). Both Muriel and Rebecca's rebellious lives are, however, curtailed by their potential to become mothers. Rebecca is never confined to the conventional role of mother because of her untimely death but she goads her husband, Maxim de Winter

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<sup>62</sup> Alison Light, ' "Returning to Manderley" – Romance, Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review*, No. 16, Summer 1984, 326-344 (337).

<sup>63</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), pp.356-62 (p.360).



into shooting her by lying that she is pregnant by another man. Her real motives for inciting her own murder are, however, unveiled when it is discovered that she had cancer, 'a certain malformation of the uterus' (*Rebecca*, p.383). There is, however, no quick way out for Holtby's Muriel Carne. She is plunged into an incurable neurosis after she gives birth to her first and only child and haunts the narrative, not from beyond the grave, but from her expensive nursing home.

Both du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Holtby's *Muriel* suffer retribution at the hands of their husbands for their rebellion against convention. *Rebecca* is vilified in order to vindicate the girl's feminine identity as de Winter's new wife. Yet, doubt still pervades the novel over whether *Rebecca* and the girl are both the victims of a male dominated class system. The reader is left wondering whether Maxim de Winter will not be driven to murder his second wife as he did his first. Equally, the reader of *South Riding* is disturbed to discover that Robert Carne is guilty of raping his wife and is responsible for her fate as an institutionalised neurotic: '[n]ever again could she partake of joy. There was nothing that could happen in heaven or on earth, which could erase the record of his violence' (*SR*, p.274). Holtby, however, also creates sympathy even for him by narrating the Carne family's past through Robert's regretful memory of that 'one hour of jealous and exasperated passion [when] he had forced her to conceive his child' (*SR*, p.143). Just before his death, Carne turns to thinking about his wild, adulterous wife once more:

And when it happened that the outcome had proved so tragic, when after the child was born, she relapsed into intermittent insanity, there had been times when he had longed for proof that this was not his doing, that the one occasion when he had forced himself upon her, taking by violence what her whim refused, had not been the final cause of her destruction. (*SR*, p.410)



Carne's memory serves as a plea for forgiveness, not only to the neurotic Muriel on whom his thoughts rest but also indirectly to the reader. Holtby's 'Rochester' figure is a man torn by guilt for his crime against Muriel, provoked by her crimes against him. There is no easy moral standpoint for Holtby's reader; both Robert and Muriel Carne are depicted as culpable victims of passion.

Nevertheless, Carne's sexual passion remains insidiously connected with acts of brutality and dominance that rupture the reader's fantasies about the novel's 'Rochester' and 'Jane Eyre' romance. The 'Rochester' figure of du Maurier's novel, though he escapes punishment for the murder of Rebecca, is also a deeply flawed romantic hero. These 1930s 'Rochester' figures are, of course, like the Brontë original who is also partially answerable for his wife's demise. Rochester confesses his past to Jane, recounting how he returned from the West Indies to Britain to have his Creole bride placed under the care of Grace Poole and 'safely lodged in that third storey room, of whose secret inner cabinet she has now made a wild beast's den' (*JE*, p.309). Rochester's culpability is highlighted in Jean Rhys' prequel to *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Though not published until 1966, Carole Angiers claims there was a draft version of this novel before 1940, which suggests that feminist and anti-imperialist readings of Rochester were circulating in the 1930s.<sup>64</sup> Rhys' novel offers a compelling tale of 'Bertha Antoinette Mason' (*JE*, p.290) and her Creole origins. It narrates Antoinette's transformation from a beautiful socialite into the hysterical, bestial mad woman of Thornfield, renamed Bertha by her husband to make her a more fitting bride for an English gentleman. Rhys depicts Antoinette / Bertha not only as a victim of mental illness but also of Rochester's colonial greed both for her exotic

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<sup>64</sup> See Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.372. Joyce Carol Oates, 'Romance and Anti-Romance: From Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to *Wide Sargasso Sea*' in *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments*, ed. Eleanor McNees (Mountfield: Helm information Ltd, 1999) vol IV, 500-510 (p.507). Heather Ingman, *Women's Fictions Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp.119-124.



beauty and her wealth. As Rhys' Rochester confesses, '[s]he's mad but *mine, mine*'.<sup>65</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals the depth of ideological and physical violence captured in the figure of Bertha Mason. Holtby's 'Bertha Mason' figure is also the victim of injustice and such tragic injustice haunts the romance between the 'Rochester' and 'Jane Eyre' of *South Riding*, testing the 'feminine middlebrow' reader's resolve to imagine a happy ending.

In *South Riding*, the knowledge of Carne's crime against Muriel complicates the reader's desire for Sarah's romantic union with him. Moreover, the more intimate Sarah becomes with Carne the more she threatens to become another Muriel and follow the fate of the neurotic lady. Sarah's desire for Carne jeopardises her identity as a professional autonomous woman and melts her identity into that of Muriel. In a reversal of anti-spinster prejudice and psychological stereotypes of the spinster, Sarah's desire to sleep with Carne and bear his child threatens to make her insane like Muriel, rather than cure her supposed sexual neuroses. The near-romantic encounter between Sarah and Carne takes place in the eighth book of the novel, entitled 'Mental Deficiency' and in a chapter entitled 'Two in a Hotel are Temporarily Insane'. Tellingly, it occurs just after Carne has been searching for a new sanatorium for Muriel. The two have a chance meeting in a Manchester Hotel. They decide to have dinner together and Sarah admits to herself and the reader the full extent of her sexual desire for Carne and her yearning to have his children: 'Oh God, she thought. I should like to bear his child. And with that desire she felt again the hot tears rising' (SR, p.344). Sarah Burton seems curiously out of character during this scene and as they dance together, she gives way to romantic fantasy. She recalls their encounter on the

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<sup>65</sup> Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, intro. Francis Wyndham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993; first pub. André Deutsch, 1966), p.136.



cliff top earlier in the novel but, tellingly, this time without the ironic reference to *Jane Eyre*:

It's not real; it's all impossible, thought Sarah. Big and black and white, Carne stood before her solid as a cliff. Into her mind flashed that vision of him in the snow on his black horse. She slid into his arms. (SR, p.347)

Without the 'irreverent but well-educated' allusion to *Jane Eyre* (SR, p.120), the tone of the snow scene veers towards the romantic stereotypes of the strong virile male and swooning, passive female. Carne becomes towering and 'solid' like a 'cliff' and Sarah becomes 'conscious of his height, his strength and her smallness' (SR, p.347). With the physical distinction between her femaleness and Carne's maleness exaggerated, Sarah's identity begins to collapse into Muriel's: 'Perhaps, she thought, if he hardly notices me, he'll think I'm Muriel' (SR, p.347). After they finish dancing, Sarah takes the initiative and suggests that they spend the night together. Again, at this point she seems to relinquish some of her status as 'head mistress' and struggles to regain her identity under the impression that Carne now views her as a loose woman:

he thinks I am a little tart. Well? I am Sarah Burton; I have Kiplington High School; he is a governor. This may destroy me. Even if I do not have his child, this may destroy me. I will be his little tart. I will comfort him for one night. (SR, pp.350-51)

Sarah wrestles with Carne's perception of her both as a Muriel substitute and a 'little tart' and with her own need to reaffirm her identity as an independent and professional woman.



Holtby, however, rescues her heroine from following Muriel's path towards wayward passion and insanity by disrupting the scene of romantic union. In this way, Sarah avoids the insanity associated with becoming one of those 'women who are women' like Muriel<sup>66</sup> and this is evident in the scene when Carne visits her room. Here the scene of romantic union is disrupted. Carne becomes more like an ailing Rochester in need of a Jane Eyre to succour him. Before his arrival, Sarah echoes the reader's romantic expectations by creating a romantic mood in the drab hotel room: 'She had turned out the central light, and beside the bed the shaded hand-lamp illuminated only her red roses in a jug' (SR, p.351). The fact that only the 'roses' are 'illuminated' stresses the rose-tinted aspect of this scene. These romantic fantasies are quickly shattered by Carne's paralysing attack of angina. When he arrives, she is forced to raise the lamp away from the roses and witness the reality of his illness: she 'raised the lamp and saw his face distorted with agony' (SR, p.352). Instead of the domineering hero, Sarah discovers 'a man of over fifty, ravaged by illness, shaken, weak' (SR, p.356). The fantasy of Carne as virile romantic hero is ruptured as he becomes more like Brontë's Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre*, a man maimed by the ravages of life whose vulnerability is physically self-evident. Sarah becomes an active 'Jane' figure once again and, acting as the physical aid to her maimed Rochester, races to fetch his medication.

This episode is not just a tantalising impediment to the final romantic union, as in *Jane Eyre* but acts as an ominous prophecy for the unhappy ending to Carne and Sarah's romance. Listening to Carne's agonised murmurings, Sarah 'knew that he was thinking of his wife' and reflects despondently that '[t]his story could not have a happy ending. It did not have a happy beginning' (SR, p.355). Sarah forecasts the

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<sup>66</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: B.U.F., 1932; repr.1934), p.54.



foiled *Jane Eyre* plot for the reader but the abrupt end to their romance still comes as a shock. The *Jane Eyre* subplot of Holtby's *South Riding*, despite the various allusions set up between Sarah and Jane and Carne and Rochester, is cruelly undercut. Carne dies abruptly about seventy pages before the end of the novel: an attack of angina plummets both he and his horse over the edge of a cliff. With this, *South Riding* banishes hopes of a 'Ferndean' reconciliation between heroine and hero. It prohibits the maimed hero's survival beyond the death of his neurotic wife and the possibility for the heroine to nurture him back to a new life with her. For Carne, his tragically insane wife survives him and his death is clouded with ignominious suspicions of suicide that only Sarah, with her knowledge of his angina attack during their clandestine meeting at the Manchester hotel, can dispel. This is certainly not the happy ending the 'feminine middlebrow' reader would have been anticipating and subverts any expectations built up around 'the memory of Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester' (SR, p.120).

The reader's disappointment with such an ending to the *Jane Eyre* romance plot is hinted at in Victor Saville's 1938 film adaptation of the novel. Saville re-writes the ending of the novel to make it a 'happy ending'.<sup>67</sup> Carne does not die (though Sarah intervenes in a supposed suicide attempt). Carne and Sarah's romance plot is depicted as torrid and passionate. The scene at the Manchester hotel for instance closes with Carne professing his love for Sarah and kissing her. The problematic elements of Sarah's desire, Carne's angina and Muriel's rape never arise. Saville's more conventional romance plot effectively silences the radical questions raised by Holtby's text about class, femininity and heterosexual relations in the interwar context. The film ends with Carne exposing the fraudulent council schemes of Snaith

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<sup>67</sup> *South Riding*. Dir. Victor Saville. Devonshire Film Company. 1938.



and Huggins as well as announcing that Maythorpe buildings will now become the new school for Sarah's pupils, instead of a home for the mentally deficient as in the novel. Overall, the film poses as an idyllic middlebrow space that valorises country life and alienates Holtby's romance plot from the political, economic and historical pressures that impinge on its representations of femininity and heterosexual relationships.

By eradicating the more problematic elements of Carne's flawed heroic status and Muriel's rape, the film paves the way for a romantic happy ending that closes down the differences between Muriel and Sarah. As Stoneman has observed, the film undermines the juxtaposition created when Sarah confronts the portrait of Muriel. In the novel, Sarah is wearing a bedraggled fur and 'spring clothes', made dirty by helping Carne deliver a calf in the stable (*SR*, p.163). Muriel is depicted in 'a dark riding habit', 'hat and crop' and epitomised as the aristocratic hunting lady (*SR*, p.167). Saville's film, however, depicts both women wearing evening gowns in this scene. At this point of the novel, Carne and Sarah are still antagonists; she sees only 'the bleak repulsion of his sombre enmity' (*SR*, p.168). By the contrast, the film adaptation uses this episode to make the romantic attraction between Carne and Sarah explicit and he dramatically kisses Sarah in front of the portrait, identifying her with Muriel in his affections. The film re-writes the ending to produce a romance plot that supports the psychosexual stereotyping of the spinster schoolmistress. Sarah finds happiness because she gets her man. In the novel, Muriel's associations with tragedy and neuroses complicate Sarah's potential happiness as Carne's lover. Sarah remains distinct from the neurotic Muriel as the rational and financially independent single professional woman. Her life continues beyond the end of the novel, not as Carne's



leisured lady but as an ordinary working woman who ‘would live out her time and finish the task before her’ (SR, p.487).

### ***Jane Eyre* and the Interwar Political Scene**

Though the film does not refer to the novel’s allusions to *Jane Eyre*, it fulfils the function of the Brontë myth for the ‘middlebrow’ audience. By undermining the radical elements of Holtby’s narrative, Saville’s film reproduces a cultural site of ‘middlebrow’ indulgence and wish-fulfilment, full of romance and escapism. These are the very elements that Holtby’s novel refutes in its insistence on situating Sarah Burton and Carne’s romance, as well as their fictional world of the ‘South Riding’, firmly within the social and political uncertainty of the interwar decades. In her critical survey of the reception of *Jane Eyre* in the interwar period, Patsy Stoneman notes that *South Riding*’s ‘historically situated’ allusions to the *Jane Eyre* plot distinguish it from other novels like *Rebecca* (Stoneman, p.103). In du Maurier’s novel, the country house as a scene of romance remains impervious to time and isolated from the historical context of a public world. By contrast, *South Riding* constantly punctuates its romantic plot with the effects of the 1930s socio-political context. In Stoneman’s view, Holtby’s romance succeeds in repudiating domestic femininity because ‘[i]t contains an element entirely missing from *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* [. . .] the public world’ (Stoneman, p.106). Stoneman’s reading rightly detects Holtby’s refusal to invoke the *Jane Eyre* plot as a timeless, romantic Brontë myth. *South Riding*’s romance plot is not purely preoccupied with the inner psychological turmoil of its ‘Jane’ and ‘Rochester’ but constantly concerned to situate this ‘Jane’ and ‘Rochester’ within the public world of the ‘South Riding’ community and the social and political concerns of the interwar years.



Failure to acknowledge the important bearing of interwar culture and politics on the novel has produced some over-simplistic critical evaluations of *South Riding*'s foiled romantic ending. A number of critics write approvingly of Holtby's so-called 'radical' ending that prioritises the spinster's work over the heterosexual hegemony of marriage and maternity.<sup>68</sup> Others have read it as disappointingly conservative. Wendy Gan argues that Sarah's choice to continue to work as the South Riding's headmistress at the close of the novel represents a consolation rather than affirmative, feminist choice. In her view, the prospect of combining marriage and career hinted at the end of Holtby's fourth novel, *Poor Caroline*, is more progressive than the ending of *South Riding*:

This time, romance is not triumphantly refused by the spinster, but has to be problematically taken away before the alternatives of female friendship and work can be posited, thus creating the impression that the achievements of the single woman are mere consolations for the loss of romance and marriage.<sup>69</sup>

Whilst Gan is right to highlight *South Riding*'s conservatism compared to *Poor Caroline*, I think that, much like Carol Dyhouse, she focuses too closely on the author's psychological outlook as a spinster.<sup>70</sup> Such purely psychological interpretations of Holtby's narrative miss the point. In my view, the problem lies less

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<sup>68</sup> See Alison Oram, 'Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World?: The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses', *Women's History Review*, 1:3, 1992, 413-33 (425). Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction, 1914-1939* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp.126-137; p.144-145. Sally Brown, 'Love and Marriage in the Works of Winifred Holtby', in *It's My Party: Reading Twentieth Century Women's Writing*, ed. Gina Wisker (London: Pluto Press, 1994), pp.147-173, (p.171).

<sup>69</sup> Wendy Gan, 'A Return to Romance: Winifred Holtby's Spinster Novels from between the Wars', *Orbis Littararum* 58:3, 2003, 202-218 (215).

<sup>70</sup> Carol Dyhouse argues that *South Riding* 'reveals a great deal about the problems the author herself must have faced in reconciling the image of herself as a capable – even powerful – woman with her sexual identity and what she had learned to recognise as femininity. See Carol Dyhouse, *Girls growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p.38.



with Sarah's or the author's psychological dilemma over work and romance than with institutional sex discrimination. Contemporary readers would have been well aware that Sarah's passion for Carne was legally proscribed by the marriage bar, rather than simply psychologically limited.

The importance of the marriage bar to the ending of *South Riding* is alluded to in Sarah's final exhortations to her pupils to 'question everything'. Amongst the many social, economic and political problems Sarah asks her pupils (and readers) to consider, she also demands them to '[q]uestion [. . .] the rule that makes women have to renounce their jobs on marriage' (SR, p.488). Implemented in the teaching profession, as well as the civil service and local authorities, marriage bars dictated that women who married or became pregnant leave their post. Such measures had been in place to a limited and local extent before the war, but became more prevalent after 1921, when the government bowed to pressure and set up regulations to limit female workers in the civil service to single and widowed women.<sup>71</sup> This paved the way for local authorities to also dismiss married female doctors, cleaners, and teachers. For example, Nottingham had introduced the marriage bar for female teachers as early as 1921 and London in 1923. By 1926, approximately three-quarters of all local authorities operated the marriage bar in the teaching profession.<sup>72</sup> The aim was to eliminate so-called 'double-earners' from the work force and alleviate unemployment, though initially the argument was that women could not efficiently carry out the two full-time jobs of raising a family and paid work (Pugh, p.93; Dyhouse, p.79). Women's resistance to the marriage bar was, however, divided, as Holtby observed in a 1930 article; when asked to vote on the retention of married women in the service, the majority of female civil servants unexpectedly voted

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p.92.

<sup>72</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England, 1800-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.79.



against employing married women – 4,795 to 138. Holtby attributes this to the promise of marriage gratuities and the average typist or clerk's romantic attitude to marriage as a release from office boredom.<sup>73</sup> Holtby is wholly in favour of abolishing the marriage bar; for her the minority of female civil servants 'saw more clearly than the others' ('The Wearer and the Shoe', *TG*, p.66). Despite feminist opposition to the marriage bar, it continued throughout the interwar period. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby resignedly remarks that 'still, in 1934, with the best intentions in the world, public authorities dismiss married women employees upon marriage' (*Women*, p.82).

As Holtby writes *South Riding* in the 1930s, she is conscious not only of the marriage bar forcing women to choose between career and marriage but also of how women's right to work dwindled with the growth of European fascism. In view of events taking place in Nazi Germany, the English marriage bar seemed just the thin end of the wedge. Such political concerns emerge in *South Riding*. Dwelling on the rise of fascism, particularly in Nazi Germany, Sarah Burton reflects how German women, married and unmarried, have been dismissed from the workforce. 'These rumours of Nazi Germany' swim into Sarah's consciousness as she recalls her past political work for disarmament and international understanding, as well as her Communist comrade, a Jew, she now believes to have died in a German concentration camp. She is reminded of a teachers' meeting in Germany two years earlier:

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<sup>73</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Wearer and the Shoe', *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985; repr. 1985), pp.64-67 (64-66).



It was important that two years ago Sarah had attended a meeting of German teachers and professional women, serious, dogmatic, experienced, decent women, sincere in their intentions. And to-day? Where were they? Under what sad compromises were their bright hopes buried? By what specious arguments did they defend their present standards? (SR, p.254)

Sarah's thoughts linger on a Europe that careers towards war, genocide and the repression of women. Holtby outlined the extent of the Nazi economic policy in *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, reporting that Jews, Communists and pacifists, as well as women, were removed from the workforce to make way for loyal Aryan males. Coaxed into surrendering their jobs to men, German women received marriage loans and maternity benefits. Holtby appears to have been particularly well informed of Hitler's impact on the teaching profession. 'Women are being increasingly excluded from educational administration', she reports, observing that following Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, '160 women teachers were then dismissed in Hamburg' (*Women*, p.155). Holtby's information on the fate of German teachers may well have come from her friend and colleague, Evelyn White, editor of *The Schoolmistress*, a journal for which Holtby wrote regularly during the early thirties. Like Holtby's Sarah Burton, White had visited her teaching counterparts in Germany and remained incredulous of the 'specious arguments' (SR, p.254) under which German women defended their whole-hearted acceptance of Hitler's 'back to home' policy:

Even the women educationists I met in Hamburg, Hanover and Berlin, during a European tour of schools and colleges in 1934, were satisfied that all was for the best,



although to them it had been particularly hurtful that the headship of all girls' schools had been given over to men teachers'.<sup>74</sup>

White corroborates Sarah's impression of the 'specious arguments' (SR, p.254) by which German women accepted the frustration of their professional ambitions and economic independence. According to Holtby, German women had wilted 'under a psychological pressure applied with formidable force' and been 'seduced by theory' (Women, p.154; p.157).

Holtby undermines the *Jane Eyre* romance plot in *South Riding* to startle her 'feminine middlebrow' reader out of a similar compliance with conservative gender ideology. Holtby refuses to let her reader follow the same path of the unresisting German women. Not permitted to indulge in romantic wish-fulfilment, neither is the reader permitted to bow to 'psychological pressure' nor be 'seduced by theory'. The reader is obliged to ask herself why Holtby's 'Jane' and 'Rochester' do not, or perhaps cannot, follow the Brontë script she knows so well. As soon as the reader attempts to imagine how Sarah might have married Carne, the more it becomes obvious that Jane's assertive words, 'Reader, I married him' (JE, p.448) can never be Sarah's. Carne's first wife is still alive and his guilty devotion to her precludes the possibility of his divorcing her to marry Sarah. At best, Sarah could hope to be Carne's mistress but, even then, she risks losing her job because she is 'an immoral woman' (SR, p.469). Moreover, Holtby subtly freights the romance between her 'Jane' and 'Rochester' with ideological and political differences. The menace of European fascism presses around the edges of Holtby's novel. *South Riding* is not just a romance but also a documentary novel fraught with class and political conflict and

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<sup>74</sup> Evelyn White, *Winifred Holtby As I Knew Her: A Study of the Author and Her Works* (London: Collins, 1938), pp.227-8.



the romance itself is not separated but totally embroiled in such conflict. Carne and Sarah are in fact romantic antagonists and in their political and ideological differences, we see Holtby's concerns about the fate of feminism facing a fascist future.

Often regarded as a prime example of the documentary or thesis novel, *South Riding* stirs romance into the narrative by invoking Brontë but this romance plot constantly leads out to a larger fictional world of rural poverty, disease, unwanted pregnancy, council plans for road and house construction, council embezzlement and bankruptcy. As Marion Shaw has rightly noted, *South Riding* also owes much to the realist tradition exemplified by George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (Shaw, p.238). As this mix of genres between romance and thesis novel suggests, Holtby's novel seeks to pass comment on the real world and to almost masquerade as a real world itself. This documentary style is emphasised by prefacing each of the eight books in the novel with excerpts from fictional council meetings, to persuade the reader that the novel might plausibly be based on true events. The novel's various plots and subplots are inescapably tied to the 1930s economic depression which hit agricultural areas hard. From a farming background herself, Holtby saw the plight of rural areas from the dual perspective of city and country dweller. *South Riding* explores some of the facets of economic depression amongst all classes of people in its agricultural community. Robert Carne struggles over 'columns of figures that never came right, because there was a slump, because the labour bill was double what it used to be and because men worked for half the time and prices stayed the same' (SR, p.14). The narrative opens onto the Carne family's 'agricultural crisis' (SR, p.14) and slowly unravels to include the whole community: the working-class Mr. Holly, living in the local slum, is unemployed; Sarah cannot secure funds for improvements to her school buildings;



Tom and Lilly Sawdon's pub never breaks even; and Councillor Huggins, short of cash to pay the blackmailing mother of his illegitimate son, must collude with the tycoon Snaith to embezzle council funds. Plans for a main arterial road to improve access to the district promise to alleviate some hardship, heralding progress for those like Sarah Burton and the Socialist councillor, Astell. For the ex-servicemen managing smallholdings and for Robert Carne of Maythorpe, however, the building of a new road only threatens to exacerbate financial failure.

Holtby also binds the fictional world of the novel to the reality of the interwar context by incorporating real-life characters. Ellen Wilkinson, the Socialist MP, even appears in the list of characters at the start of the novel, as does the popular choral singer, Terry Bryan. Such real-life characters are specifically introduced into the plot through the romantic antagonism between Sarah Burton and Robert Carne. Ellen Wilkinson is referred to by one of the novel's characters, the Socialist councillor, Astell, who becomes Sarah's friend. He suggests that Sarah's red hair reminds him of the highly prominent Socialist MP and asks if she is any relation to Wilkinson. Sarah answers to the contrary but relates an anecdote about taking her students to hear Wilkinson speak. She answers Astell's sceptical insinuation that she is striving to indoctrinate her students with socialist ideas:

Well, I think any ideas are better than none for sixth-form girls. They've got to go through their political adolescence, and I'd rather they fell for Ellen Wilkinson than - say  
- Oswald Mosley. (*SR*, p.104)

By the end of this chapter, Sarah, though she claims 'I am a school-marm – I take no part in politics' (*SR*, p.104), has become associated in the reader's mind with Ellen Wilkinson. As she admits, her working class background as a blacksmith's daughter



means that she votes Labour. She prefers her female pupils to emulate Wilkinson rather than the leader of the British Union of Fascists, Sir Oswald Mosley, which suggests Wilkinson's and her own political antagonism to Mosley. It is through talking to the Socialist Astell that Sarah realises that she must also be a 'natural antagonist' to the local Conservative and reactionary aristocrat, Robert Carne (*SR*, p.191). The chapter closes fulfilling the promise of its title; Sarah having acquired 'An Ally' in Astell and 'Carne an Enemy' in Sarah (*SR*, p.98).

In this way, Carne becomes the fictional adversary of the real-life Labour politician, Ellen Wilkinson. Wilkinson herself reviewed *South Riding* for the feminist journal, *Time and Tide*, in 1936. She observes that Carne 'could have been the hero of a Victorian "three volume" but he fits into our own time' and does so by playing the role of what Wilkinson terms 'the fascist aristocratic type' just like Mosley.<sup>75</sup> Throughout the novel, Carne is associated with the iconic black and white photographs of fascist leaders. The first time we see Carne, we view him through the eyes of the young reporter, Lovell Brown: 'Lovell saw Carne, a big heavy handsome unhappy-looking man. Under a thatch of thick black hair, his white face was not unlike that on photographs of Mussolini, except for its fine-drawn sensitive mouth with turned-down corners' (*SR*, p.4). Sarah's perceptions of Carne in the snow scene on the cliff stress the black and white colours associated with him. Even when she slides into his arms at the Manchester hotel, he is 'Big and black and white [. . .] solid as a cliff' (*SR*, p.347). Carne's ability to attract Sarah and Mrs. Beddows with 'the smile which had won his wife' and 'given Carne of Maythorpe a reputation for popularity' also subtly endows him with the fascist machismo of Mussolini and the notorious sexual appeal of Mosley (*SR*, p.120). Sarah's final encounter with Carne,

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<sup>75</sup> Ellen Wilkinson MP, 'Winifred Holtby's Last Novel', *Time and Tide*, 7 March 1936, pp.323-4 (p.324).



again underlines his associations with fascist opposition and dictatorial authority. She considers ‘the obstinate lines of his big handsome face [. . .] She thought, he’s just like Mussolini’ (SR, p.400). Once again, Sarah’s thoughts, as with the *Jane Eyre* reference, anticipate the thought associations of the feminine middlebrow reader. As she argues with him, Sarah even makes these associations with the fascist leader explicit to Carne himself: ‘You come bounding in here like a bucolic Mussolini and expect me to sit down meekly under your denunciations’ (SR, p.401).

The political and ideological overtones to the ‘Jane’ and ‘Rochester’ romance complicate the reader’s desire for romantic union. Not only is Carne a flawed romantic hero because of his part in Muriel’s downfall, he is also subtly aligned with the macho chauvinism of Sir Oswald Mosley and Mussolini. This romantic and political antagonism between Sarah and Carne is, however, also articulated through the conflict between reason and passion.

### **Beyond Reason and Beyond Passion**

*South Riding* expresses Holtby’s reading of the interwar public world as a battle between rationalism and instinct, which the previous chapter considered in relation to the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft on Holtby’s feminist thought. *South Riding* reveals that Charlotte Brontë’s novels also help Holtby to express her understanding of the relationship between feminism, fascism and psychology under the terms of reason and passion. Jane’s journey through Brontë’s novel is figured via the negotiation of reason and sexual passion. On discovering the existence of Rochester’s first wife, Jane determines to leave Rochester rather than become his mistress. She is compelled to use her reason to fight against her own and Rochester’s sexual passion: ‘while he spoke my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and



charged me with crime in resisting him. They spoke almost as loud as Feeling' (*JE*, p.342). The potential danger that Jane's 'Feeling' might conquer her 'reason' is, however, averted. She leaves him only to discover her cousin St John, whose icy logic compels her to reject his marriage proposal and return to the passionate Rochester. Holtby's 1930s heroine's journey through *South Riding* recalls Jane Eyre's struggle between reason and passion:

All her life she would love him and all her life she would fight against him. His ways were not her ways, his values were not her values. She had followed her reason until her passion crossed it, and now she sought, beyond reason and beyond passion, some further meeting-place. (*SR*, p.475)

'[A]ction', 'fighting' and 'intelligence' are what it means for Sarah to have 'followed her reason' (*SR*, p.475) and she follows reason in the hope of improving 'a still inadequately enlightened state'. This path of reason represents Sarah's feminist, liberal and progressive ideals; all of which are opposed to the landed values of Robert Carne. Sarah arrives at this conclusion early on in the novel:

I know his type, she thought – aristocrats, Conservatives, vindicators of tradition against experiment, of instinct against reason, of piety against progress. (*SR*, p.107)

Carne represents 'instinct against reason' and as such is positioned as Sarah's 'natural antagonist'. '[A]lways as' Sarah 'planned and wrote and argued, she saw Councillor Carne in her mind's eye as the apostle and ringleader of reaction, the author of false economies' (*SR*, p.176). Later, when Carne opposes her plans for the school, she accuses him of deluding himself, 'You think you can stop progress and reason' (*SR*,



p.400), insinuating that in this he opposes the ‘progress and reason’ for which she has come to stand. Even after his death, however, she feels their political differences can never be reconciled – she continues both to love and fight him. She is tormented by the realisation that all the work she strives for – for the new school buildings and the new road through the ‘South Riding’ – represent everything that he fought against: ‘[a]ll my life I can do nothing but destroy where you have builded and build where you have destroyed’ (SR, p.476).

So polarised are Sarah and Carne’s class and ideological values that any reconciliation seems impossible. There appears to be no way in which their differences can be levelled up as they are between Jane and Rochester at the end of Brontë’s novel. The class differences between Brontë’s romantic protagonists are conveniently elided. Jane inherits colonial wealth from her recently deceased uncle in Madeira and becomes a woman of independent means. The fire at Thornfield diminishes Rochester of his wealth and status as landed gentleman and physically blinds him, placing him at the mercy of Jane’s solicitude. Rochester realises that Jane was right to exercise her reason and temporarily leave him and Jane realises that she needs Rochester’s passionate nature to complement her own. *South Riding* also promises to see Carne fall into the arms of his ‘Jane Eyre’ – he too suffers the loss of landed estate and ill health. Further, his passionate and temperamental nature seems to find relief in quarrelling with Sarah and the conflict between their reason and passion has a curative effect. In their final encounter before Carne’s death, the two quarrel over whether Carne’s daughter should leave school. Sarah ‘faced him small and furious, in arms against everything he stood for’ (SR, p.400). Carne storms off but confesses ‘that part of him had really enjoyed the quarrel’ since ‘He was a hot-tempered son of a hot-tempered father, and for many years he had suffered from the



necessity of controlling his turbulent nature' (SR, p.401). In fact, Carne even admits to himself that he had 'gone out of his way to pick a quarrel with her as a self-prescribed tonic for his over-strained exhausted nerves' (SR, p.402). Carne's parting message for Sarah - 'I wouldn't miss quarrelling with her for a great deal' (SR, p.403) – is confided to his close-friend Mrs Beddows and seals his affection for Sarah as a romantic antagonist.

Holtby paradoxically offers her reader hope of romantic reconciliation through conflict. After Carne's death, Sarah must face the fact that they can never reconcile their differences. Yet, under the wise tutelage of the seventy-year old Alderman, Mrs Beddows, Sarah learns how to accept her conflicting feelings for Carne by pledging herself to work in the community he loved. Mrs Beddows reassures Sarah that '[i]n the end it's not politics nor opinions – it's those fundamental things that count – things of the spirit [. . .] Perhaps in an end too far away for us to dream of' (SR, p.374). Mrs. Beddows' advice contributes to Sarah's epiphany at the end of the novel when she recognises her love for Carne as a point of union between them and the community:

It was as though each of them having known love intensely even though not for each other, they had entered into some element greater than themselves, and, becoming part of it, existed eternally within it, and, being thus transformed became part of each other. (SR, p.476)

Sarah's love for Carne invokes a spiritual experience, an epiphany that seems to shift the register of the novel away from Sarah's personal and emotional turmoil to social considerations of her place in the wider community. Holtby's narrative does achieve reconciliation but not through domesticating its heroine, as in *Jane Eyre*. Instead of



marital bliss at Ferndean cottage, Sarah's romantic reconciliation leads her out into the public world of the 'South Riding' community.

The novel's epilogue takes place at the 'Silver Jubilee', 'May 6<sup>th</sup> 1935' - a public event that takes place both in the novel and the real world. It serves to position Sarah at the juncture between the public world of the 'South Riding' and the public world of 1930s Britain. The novel becomes more panoramic as Sarah scales the whole of the South Riding from the plane flight with the newspaper reporter, Lovell Brown. Not only does the flight broaden her horizon such that she can see 'the edge of England' but also in a quasi-religious experience she imagines herself being 'carried . . . away in the spirit to a high mountain' (SR, p.484). Now, as she looks upon the landscape, Sarah's mind is filled with the people who live in it; it no longer represents a backdrop, or the raw material, for her own achievement or personal turmoil of her romance plot. With this shift in perspective, she abandons her old individualistic motto 'Take what you want, said God: take it and pay for it' and reflects on the phrase from Ephesians instead, 'we are members one of another' which encapsulates for her 'what it means - to belong to a community [. . .] to be a people' (SR, pp.490-1). Sarah Burton's reconciliation between failed romance and her role in the community as a schoolmistress blurs the fictional world of *South Riding* with the real-life anxieties of the 1930s. Sarah confronts the future and its uncertainty: 'the thought of war threatening this placid country sickened her' (SR, p.484). The reader contemplates the prospect of the South Riding's small community through Sarah eyes, surveying both it and their own situation from the wider perspective of national and international politics with the Second World War glowering on the meridian.

When Sarah reflects on her romance with Carne and her journey through the novel, she longs to reach 'beyond reason and beyond passion, some further meeting-



place' (SR, p.475). The ending of *South Riding* does suggest that she finds 'some further meeting-place' through her work in the South Riding community. She develops a sense of social belonging which seems to offer her a vantage point from which to reconcile the conflict between her romantic and political ideals and which enables her to advise her pupils and readers: 'questioning does not mean the end of loving and loving does not mean the abnegation of intelligence' (SR, p.488).

The 'feminine middlebrow' reader has followed the events of *South Riding* by identifying with Sarah Burton as a 'Jane Eyre' heroine. The subverted romance plot guides the reader into following Sarah's advice, simultaneously 'loving' the promise of the romantic union but also 'questioning' it. According to Elizabeth Maslen, Holtby succeeds in:

enticing us into accepting her reality over and above literary intertextuality, although that intertextuality has been one of the ways in which she has tempted the reader to confront the graver issues which rewrite the priorities of the Brontë text.<sup>76</sup>

This is certainly true but I think it is also important to remember that Holtby invokes the *Jane Eyre* intertextuality to encourage 'questioning' and 'loving' not only in relation to her own romance plot. *South Riding* also subtly directs the reader's gaze back to the Brontë text itself.

Just as *South Riding* becomes in its own right a 'further meeting-place' for the 'questioning' and 'loving', 'reason' and 'passion' of reading experience, so too is *Jane Eyre* transformed into such a 'meeting-place'. After all, *Jane Eyre* does not close with a scene of marital bliss. Jane's thoughts go out to the rejected suitor, St.

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<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.38.



John Rivers. Like Sarah Burton, her vision stretches beyond the Yorkshire horizon to the world beyond, to India where St John works out his days as a missionary. It points to an alternative ending where, like Holtby's Sarah Burton, Jane too might have spent her life working in the public world. Though *South Riding* subverts the *Jane Eyre* romance plot, it does perhaps carry through to fruition the lingering longing for work in the public world that glimmers in that final vision of St John Rivers.

In this light, the questioning prompted by *South Riding*'s foiled romance plot resonates with yet another of Brontë's novels. The sense of unease present at the close of *Jane Eyre* points to what will become the more ambiguous and paradoxical ending of Brontë's 1853 novel, *Villette*. Unlike with *Jane Eyre*, however, Holtby offers no ironic allusion to *Villette*. Only at the conclusion of *South Riding* does the reader begin to see that the schoolmistress Sarah Burton has been a composite echo of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe. Brontë's Lucy Snowe teaches at Madame Beck's *Pennsionat* for girls and is eventually offered the opportunity to become the headmistress of her fiancé's school. Sarah Burton not only shares Lucy's profession but also her romantic journey via reason and passion. Lucy wrestles 'under the dry stinting check of Reason, or according to the full, liberal impulse of feeling' to finally suppress her attraction for Dr John and develops an unlikely romance instead with her fellow teacher and mentor, M. Paul.<sup>77</sup> Where Sarah and Carne are romantic antagonists because of their political differences, Lucy and her romantic antagonist are divided by religious belief – Lucy is Protestant whilst M. Paul is Catholic. Again, Sarah and Carne's quarrels recall those of Lucy and M. Paul: where Lucy strives to retain her rational composure, M. Paul is 'a mere sprite of caprice' (*Villette*, p.235) and Lucy admits even after a brief truce 'I was quarrelling with M. Paul again before

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<sup>77</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, intro. Gilbert Phelps (London: Pan, 1973; first pub. 1853), p.245.



night' (*Villette*, p.317). Lucy's relationship with her teaching colleague, M. Paul, is not suffused with the same level of romantic feeling that her previous attachment to Dr John had entailed. M. Paul and Lucy are adversarial colleagues, mentor and student, and eventually friends. This friendship brings an unexpected and reticent romance. Towards the end of the novel, M. Paul professes his love for Lucy and offers her the gift of becoming the headmistress of their school in his absence. He sets sail to Guadeloupe to conduct business on his plantation estates and never resurfaces in the narrative. Lucy's separation from her fiancé is supposed to be only temporary but Brontë drops a note of tragic ambiguity to complicate the happy-ending of romantic union. Lucy receives letters confirming M. Paul's return but the reader never witnesses him arrive. Doubts are fostered that he has been lost, shipwrecked by violent storms, since when 'the sun returned, his light was night to some' (*Villette*, p.481). Brontë leaves the ending open, refusing to confirm whether M. Paul has died. It is therefore left to the reader to decide whether the ending shall be happy or not: '[t]here is enough said, trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope [. . .] Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life' (*Villette*, p.481).

The indecision at the end of *Villette* articulates Brontë's irresolvable dilemma of reconciling female autonomy with the marriage plot. What is merely hinted at in *Jane Eyre* is more overtly expressed in the ambiguous ending of *Villette*. M. Paul is a problematic romantic hero for Lucy because he remains a figure of masculine authority. Robert Carne, as we saw above, is depicted as a dubious romantic hero in *South Riding* because Sarah compares him to Mussolini. Lucy also compares her romantic hero to a tyrannical dictator, observing that 'he had points of resemblance to Napoleon Bonaparte. I think so still' (*Villette*, p.338). Both Brontë and Holtby imply that even if their romantic heroes had remained in the narrative, there would be no



guarantee of happiness for the heroine in romantic union. Contrary to the romantic reader's expectations therefore, Lucy is at her happiest and most successful in M. Paul's absence, as she confides to the reader:

M. Emmanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox? Listen.

I commenced my school; I worked – I worked hard. (*Villette*, p.478)

Whether or not M. Paul returns, we know that the end of love has not brought the end of Lucy's life because her tale testifies to her continuing existence. As Gilbert and Gubar remark, 'Brontë gives us an open-ended elusive fiction, refraining from any definitive message except to remind us of the continued need for sustaining stories of survival' (Gilbert and Gubar, p.438).

The ending of *South Riding* is less ambiguous than that of *Villette*; we know that the romantic hero has died. Yet it recalls the underlying feminist message of Brontë's text, that romantic love does not have to govern the course or even the end of women's lives. Lucy is happy because she 'worked hard' (*Villette*, p.478) and Sarah Burton follows her example, convinced that 'she would live out her time and finish the task before her' (*SR*, p.487). Sarah's 'task' is to teach the girls of her school. This pledge to live for her work is followed by her advice to her pupils and Holtby's readers alike: to 'question everything' (*SR*, p.488). *Villette* is Lucy Snowe's story of survival beyond reason and passion through work and writing. Sarah Burton's advice at the end of *South Riding* and her determination to work are also the fruits of her bitter experiences of surviving beyond the romantic ending. In 1936, Ellen Wilkinson, a Socialist MP and spinster herself, encapsulates this when she declares that the success of *South Riding* lay in Sarah's story of survival through work:



Because Sarah had “followed reason until her passion crossed it,” she had to seek beyond reason and beyond passion her adjustment to life. She found it in work. The triumph of this book is its gospel of the saving power of worthwhile work.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ellen Wilkinson MP, ‘Winifred Holtby’s Last Novel’, *Time and Tide*, 7 March 1936. Hull Archives.



## Conclusions

*The Crowded Street* and *South Riding* both reveal that the pursuit of instinct itself can lead to 'frustration' rather than cure it. As Muriel Hammond makes clear in *The Crowded Street*, her own pursuit of 'sex success' to gain social prestige strips her life of any other meaning than the pursuit of instinct and when she cannot find a husband, she is plunged into despair and frustration at having nothing to fill her time. In this way, she becomes a twentieth century reincarnation of Caroline Helstone and eventually offers the same critique of marriage. In *South Riding*, Sarah Burton's principled control of her passions and rational perspective represents the antithesis of the tragically insane Muriel Carne. Muriel Carne's hedonistic pursuit of sexual passion provokes jealousy in her husband who, following his own instinct, forces her to unwillingly bear his child. The instinctual forces underpinning sexual division prove destructive rather than curative for Muriel Carne and plummet her into incurable neurosis.

Holtby is keen to suggest to her reader that work and desire should be able to co-exist side-by-side in women's lives. To achieve this in her fiction, she appeals to her 'feminine middlebrow' reader's knowledge of Charlotte Brontë's romance plots and deliberately courts the possibility of a happy-ending in the reader's imagination. When this is unexpectedly subverted, Holtby disrupts the pleasurable fantasies of romantic union and compels her readers to contemplate how that union might unavoidably compromise the heroine's independence and right to work. Holtby therefore forces her readers to ask some difficult questions about their own desires and attitudes towards romance and marriage amidst the interwar pressures towards sexual division.



## Chapter 3

### The 'Cult of the Cradle': Maternity, Fascism and the 'Inferiority Complex'

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#### Introduction

'The idea of my own sex as being created for the purpose of wifedom and motherhood does not commend itself to me', writes Cicely Hamilton in 1932.<sup>1</sup> Hamilton was an ex-suffragette who shared Holtby's commitment to sexual equality. After conducting a tour of Italy as it was under Mussolini's rule in the 1930s, she documents the findings of her trip in her travel book, *Modern Italy As Seen By An Englishwoman*. From the outset, she acknowledges that hers is a perspective originating from 'a more personal tradition of feminism that runs counter – very strongly counter – to the fascist idea of womanhood and womanly destiny' (Hamilton, p.xi). Hamilton sums up the fascist state's attitudes to women and motherhood as 'The Cult of the Cradle'. In 1934, Holtby also takes up this term from Hamilton in order to describe the eugenicist and national supremacist goals of the fascist state:

One of the theories, however, associated with militant nationalism, has a very direct and vital effect upon the position of women, and that is what Miss Cicely Hamilton in her book on Modern Italy called 'The Cult of the Cradle'. In Italy, in Germany, in Ireland and in France to-day fecundity is revered as a patriotic virtue. Babies are potential citizens and potential soldiers. Ultimately the state with the largest population comes out on top. The mother who fills the cradle enables her sovereign to fill the world. (*Women*, p.166)

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<sup>1</sup> Cicely Hamilton, *Modern Italy As Seen By An Englishwoman* (Letchworth: Temple Press, 1932), pp.ix-xi.



Though Holtby observes that 'The Cult of the Cradle' has gained most ground in Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany, she remains aware that it is not confined to these countries but pervades all of Europe, including Britain. As she warns her readers, "The Cult of the Cradle," in one form or another affects women almost everywhere, even where it fails to receive government support'.<sup>2</sup>

Holtby is aware that 'The Cult of the Cradle' has facilitated legislative and institutional improvements for mothers. For example, under fascist rule both Germany and Italy had provided tax relief and marriage loans for families, as well as state support for mothers and child welfare. 'Respect for maternity', she confesses 'is naturally not in itself a bad thing for women' (*Women*, p.168). Yet, the compulsory nature of 'The Cult of the Cradle' disconcerts Holtby because it removes women's choice to contribute to society in other ways beside motherhood. In her view, it forces all women to become one of Mosley's 'women who are women',<sup>3</sup> one of the 'normal' mothers and wives relegated to the home. For her, one of the surest indicators of this is the 'cult's' abhorrence of birth control:

The right to choose her own time for her achievement of maternity, the ability to plan her life and work, the freedom from that accidental element which previously rendered her an uncertain unit in social organisation, these consequences of scientific birth control have perhaps been the greatest assets which modern civilisation has given to women. But the cult of the cradle cancels them. It suspects all freedom. It prefers the docility of the good breeder and the fecundity of the good milch cow to the capacity and companionship of a free human being, and sacrifices the mother in one generation to the children who may become mothers and fathers in the own. "Hammers producing hammers, producing hammers – and never a nail knocked in." (*Women*, pp.169-170)

<sup>2</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (Chicago: Cassandra Editions, 1978; first pub. London: John Lane, 1934), p.168. Further page references hereafter denoted by *Women* in the main text.

<sup>3</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: B.U.F., 1932; repr.1934), p.54.



This chapter focuses on Holtby's representation of women as mothers and how 'The Cult of the Cradle' affects them between the wars. Holtby holds the 'cult' responsible for stifling women's potential beyond motherhood. Moreover, she argues that it sets up a vicious cycle of 'hammers producing hammers' where the 'cult', spurred on by nationalism and fascism, breeds yet more nationalists and fascists.

Previous scholarly attention to Holtby has focused on the representation of single professional women and female friendships in her novels. Her representations of mothers and her concerns about the political implications of 'The Cult of the Cradle' are often overlooked, as are her representations of the mother-son relationship and its effect on representations of masculinity in her fiction. This chapter addresses these blind spots in Holtby criticism by focusing on her attention to the political impact of the interwar obsession with 'The Cult of the Cradle' on women's economic and political emancipation.

As in the previous two chapters, this chapter continues to explore Holtby's resistance to theories of instinct and sexual division in interwar politics and culture. I focus here on how Holtby examines ways in which mothers can control the impetus towards 'The Cult of the Cradle'. Holtby develops a psychological analysis of 'The Cult of the Cradle'. Alfred Adler's psychological concept of the 'inferiority complex' becomes central to this. Holtby increasingly adopts this term after 1927 in order to analyse women's social and economic position, as well as cultural attitudes to motherhood. The term had been current in feminist circles since the early 1920s but had largely been associated with the single woman and women's right to work. Holtby broadens its application and analyses the 'inferiority complexes' suffered by mothers under the cultural and political drive towards maternity and home. This undermines stereotypical assumptions that only unmarried, childless women suffered



from mental pathology. In Holtby's view, mothers too were prone to 'inferiority complexes' that could have potentially damaging consequences on their offspring. Through a still broader application of the concept of 'the inferiority complex', Holtby begins to identify the masculine and cultural 'inferiority complexes' that breed fascism.

Part one of this chapter examines why Holtby begins to consider the concept of the 'inferiority complex' in relation to mothers. It examines the popular reception of this psychological terminology and its origin in the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler, a Viennese psychologist who had worked closely with Freud but then broke away to form his own school of psychology in 1911. Adler becomes central to concepts of child psychology and childrearing in the interwar period and his theories are often disseminated in mothering manuals. Holtby rehabilitates his theories from their complicity with the cultural impetus towards maternal instinct by highlighting how mothers might use Adler's concept of the 'inferiority complex' to understand both their children and the political climate of the interwar period. Part two turns to Holtby's fifth novel, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1933), analysing how a maternal 'inferiority complex' can produce cultural complexes that lead to ideological and political violence. In this novel, Holtby reveals how the mother-son relationship can breed 'inferiority complexes' that lead to nationalism and imperialist exploitation. Finally, part three takes a detailed look at Holtby's anti-fascist play, *Take Back Your Freedom*, where Holtby plots a course from the 'inferiority complexes' generated by the mother-son relationship to the rise of a fascist dictatorship in Britain.



## Part 1

### 'The Inferiority Complex': Mothers and Spoilt Children

Holtby's concerns about the interwar obsession with 'The Cult of the Cradle' intensified through her role as second mother to Vera Brittain's children: Brittain's son, John Edward, had been born in 1927 and her daughter, Shirley, in 1930. Holtby's role as second mother or 'aunt' to the children impacts on her thinking about feminism and maternity from 1927, as an article from the *Manchester Guardian* reveals. Written shortly after John Edward's birth, Holtby's article, entitled, 'Exit Papa: Families Under Revision', speculates on the changing family structure of the interwar period. According to Holtby, family life in the interwar years had become less patriarchal and more flexible, with the economically independent, unmarried woman or 'maiden aunt' playing a more active role in raising children:

I live with John Edward's family, paying my adequate part of its expenses, deriving pleasure out of its society, and in return doing occasional odd jobs which make it easier for John Edward's mother to combine motherhood and a career, as I combine aunthood and a career.

We now may find them, the maiden aunts of the new society, living with their self-chosen families, as independent equals, satisfying their natural instincts for domesticity while helping to solve the economic problem of the young couple.<sup>4</sup>

The deaths of so many young men in the First World War had exacerbated the 'excess' of women to men in the British population. As Jane Lewis highlights, the 'excess' of women of child-bearing age in 1921 was almost double that in 1911, with

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<sup>4</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Exit Papas: Families Under Revision', *Manchester Guardian*, 26 October 1928, p.8.



1, 174, 000 'excess' women compared to 664 000 before the war.<sup>5</sup> Holtby's reference to her personal experience as a 'maiden aunt' dispels stereotypical interwar assumptions that such 'excess' women remained excluded from family life and childrearing. Holtby proves the 'maiden aunt' could have career and family and in doing so made it possible for mothers like Vera Brittain 'to combine motherhood and career'. This article paves the way for Holtby's increasing confidence to speak on issues of maternity, having in a sense validated her own maternal credentials through aunthood.

To achieve this growth in understanding and enthusiasm to speak on issues surrounding maternity from a spinster aunt's perspective, Holtby had to negotiate her own insecurities on the matter. In her first novel, *Anderby Wold*, these doubts about the 'maiden aunt's' role in the nursery had been voiced through the childless wife, Mary Robson. Here, Mary, is made to feel a disappointment to the family on the birth of her sister's baby boy. Her sister, Ursula, becomes the centre of attention after the birth and shows off her newfound knowledge of psychological theories on childrearing. 'Before the arrival of her son', we are told, 'she had declared that all babies had bored her to sobs, but recently, having consumed vast quantities of literature on the subject of their upbringing she had learnt all about them that was to be known'.<sup>6</sup> The childless Mary is left out in the cold, feeling 'terribly behind the times', conscious that Ursula's self-absorbed attention in her son is valued far more highly than Mary's philanthropic work with the village children (AW, p.162). These insecurities arise again in another of Holtby's articles for the *Manchester Guardian* in 1928, entitled, 'A Spinster in the Nest', where Holtby confesses feelings of inadequacy in her role as 'maiden aunt'. Aunts, she decides, feel 'like blacklegs with

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<sup>5</sup> Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf, 1984), p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Anderby Wold* (London: Virago, 1981; first pub. 1923), p.162.



inferiority complexes' because they are untrained and unskilled to help mothers in the nursery.<sup>7</sup> Holtby pursues her socialist analysis of labour relations in the home to offer a solution to the spinster aunt's 'inferiority complex':

No diffident, unskilled blackleg hanging about outside a railway shed in a slack season can feel more of an outsider than the untrained spinster in the nursery . . . But recently one down-trodden and dejected aunt has had an idea. I am that aunt. Why not a new trade union of childless spinsters, with week-end schools at which we learn this new and difficult business of becoming a modern aunt? ('The Spinster in the Nest', p.8)

Compared to her first novel, *Anderby Wold* (1923), Holtby's pro-active, if slightly idealistic, solution to the aunt's 'inferiority complex' here marks a more positive attitude to the aunt's potentially maternal role in the family. Mary Robson of *Anderby Wold* epitomises the 'black-leg' aunt in the nursery and there seems to be no possibility for her to bridge the gap between her own childless existence and her sister's new-found maternal joy. Five years later, however, though Holtby is still conscious of the insecurities and sense of exclusion experienced by childless women, she sees a way forward for childless aunts to work together with mothers in raising the next generation. The 'modern aunt' like the modern mother can also learn the new theories on child-care and child psychology according to Holtby.

By writing about her own difficulties in coming to terms with her status as an aunt, Holtby indicates how the childless spinster could overcome her 'inferiority complex' about maternity. This personal struggle for Holtby, however, also yields her some insight into the 'inferiority complexes' experienced by mothers themselves. Her work during the 1930s increasingly depicts 'The Cult of the Cradle' as a force that

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<sup>7</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Spinster in the Nest', *Manchester Guardian*, 29 March 1928, p.8.



eliminates choice and freedom in women's lives under the imperative of sexual division and explores the damaging effects of 'inferiority complexes' on both mothers and their offspring.

### **Mothering the 'Hitler in the Cradle'**

As the 'maiden aunt' to Vera Brittain's children, Holtby was increasingly conscious of the improvements made for mothers over the interwar decades. Developments in theory and knowledge around childrearing made a positive impact on many middle class mothers. Yet, Holtby remained cautious about the political impact of these improvements. Many of these advances demanded more time and effort from mothers than before and played into the cultural and political emphasis on maternity, gathering momentum under the influence of European fascism. On one hand, the new theories on 'mothercraft' rendered the modern mother a rational and informed one but, on the other hand, confined her attentions even more closely to the home, often in Holtby's view at the expense of her wider public and political contribution.

'The Hitler in the Cradle' is the title of a 1935 article by Holtby, published in *The Quiver*, a liberal and feminist journal to which Holtby often contributed articles directed at women's social and political concerns. Here, she observes the interwar trend towards improving and honouring maternity, all facilitated by feminist campaigns for legislative progress. Progress had been achieved by women during the interwar period in areas such as child and maternal welfare, ante-natal clinics, better education, school meals and convalescent homes for new mothers and babies; health visitors and home helps were also employed to give health check-ups and support to mothers at home. Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, published a year



earlier, had also highlighted these advances for mothers, though it had cautioned that many of these initiatives were still only on a local level and needed national legislation to make them mandatory everywhere (*Women*, p.142). Nevertheless, Holtby does confirm that 'a beginning has been made' and that '[t]he amount of care and thought expended on the business of bringing healthy and undamaged children into the world has never been surpassed' (*Women*, p.142). Into this gamut of improvement, Holtby also groups the wider availability of birth control and argues that maternal mortality might be reduced if Britain followed the path of Communist Russia and legalised abortion (*Women*, pp.136-7).

In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, Holtby defends the modern mother against charges of neglect and vindicates her as rational and knowledgeable. As she stresses, if the modern mother 'is really "new-fashioned", her care for her children begins even before marriage' with regular health check-ups and the use of birth control (*Women*, p.136). Despite this, however, there is still a note of ambivalence in Holtby's account of women's place as mothers between the wars and this ambivalence is heightened into concern in her 1935 article, 'The Hitler in the Cradle'. Though Holtby cannot deny the value of improvements in care for mothers, she nevertheless has her reservations about the cultural and political emphasis on maternity. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, she suggests this emphasis on maternity obstructs advances in other areas of women's lives:

Maternity is considered so honourable that in its name divorce law is delayed beyond all reason, women are underpaid, the education of many girls is crippled, women are denied the right of entry into posts which they could occupy with profit, or are forced to resign from work which they can do and which needs doing. (*Women*, p.143)



Here, Holtby asserts that women's potential to be mothers, though increasingly provided for by legislations and institutions, also militates against their rights to equal pay, equal employment opportunities and equal education. In her view, such civil inequalities in the name of motherhood maintained women's economic dependency on their husbands and thwarted feminist demands for changes in divorce law.<sup>8</sup> In 'The Hitler in the Cradle', Holtby turns her attentions away from the legal issues surrounding maternity to the impact of psychological and mothercraft theories on cultural attitudes prioritising maternity:

A third cause of the new attitude has been the individual work of pioneer reformers, in the spheres of medicine, psychology and education. The work of Dr. Truby King in New Zealand, to save the children in scattered farms in that Dominion; the influence of Viennese psychologists, Freud and Adler, filtering down through their various disciples and interpreters till every two-penny "women's magazine" on the station bookstalls, and every conscientious young mother preparing herself for the arrival of her first baby, became at least in some measure aware that its first two or three years' experience of life might leave an indelible impression upon the mind of the coming child.<sup>9</sup>

Holtby outlines three important influences on theories of child-care – 'Dr. Truby King, Freud and Adler' – all of whom were diluted and filtered down for mass consumption by interwar mothers. Billie Melman's fascinating study of popular literature in the 1920s argues that such 'two-penny magazines' were crucial both in shaping and articulating 'new attitudes': '[t]he best-seller with a brief claim to fame,

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<sup>8</sup> The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 had allowed women to divorce husbands on the single grounds of adultery but it was not until 1937 that women could also divorce on the grounds of insanity, cruelty and desertion. See Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1800-1939*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp.194-195.

<sup>9</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, 'The Hitler in the Cradle: A Modern Woman's Emphatic Protest Against the Tendency to Swing the Pendulum too far in the matter of Child-Rearing', *The Quiver*, June 1935, WH/2/2.18/01e.



the instantly consumed magazine or paper, are sensitive seismographs of the shifts in the attitudes and moods of the majorities'.<sup>10</sup> Jane Lewis also notes that '[m]anuals and magazine articles were the main source of information on childrearing practices for middle-class women'.<sup>11</sup>

In her detailed account of mothering advice since the eighteenth century, *Dream Babies; Child Care from Locke to Spock*, Christina Hardyment confirms that Freud and Adler influenced theories of mothering and child-rearing in the interwar years, though the most powerful influence dominating infant care was Dr Frederick Truby King.<sup>12</sup> Dr Truby King, whom Holtby mentions above, became almost iconic and was, as Lewis confirms, 'the most popular author of infant-care manuals during the interwar period' (Lewis, 1980, p.73). A medical graduate from Edinburgh, Truby King travelled to work in New Zealand where he lectured on psychology and became interested in the scientific rearing of animals. An epidemic of deadly disease amongst bucket-fed calves prompted Truby King to speculate that a 'scientific system' of feeding would decrease the deaths in calves and from this he broadened his theories to human babies. His success led to the establishment of his 'Mothercraft Movement', first in New Zealand, and then in Britain after 1917 when he established a mothercraft school at Highgate (Hardyment, pp.176-179). 'For the next thirty years,' Hardyment observes, 'the "Truby King Baby" became the ambition of Britain's mothers' (Hardyment, p.179). Truby King advocated breast-feeding over bottle-feeding, insisting that 'Breast is Best'. In his view, over 95% of mothers were capable of breast-feeding if they used his method. He believed breast-feeding reduced infant

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<sup>10</sup> Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.9.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England, 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), p.101.

<sup>12</sup> Christina Hardyment, *Dream Babies: Child Care from Locke to Spock* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p.165.



mortality because it allowed mothers to pass on immunity against disease to their infants and because cow's milk was often contaminated (Hardyment, p.178-180). His system involved a scientific approach to feeding with strictly regulated times. For example, according to Truby King's advice in the 1930s, an infant should be breast-fed every four hours with 15-20 minutes at each breast (Lewis, 1980, p.71). Further, night feeding was prohibited under the Truby King regime and both mother and baby were supposed to sleep uninterrupted for eight hours per night. Truby King also advocated that babies should be left to their own devices and should not be given toys but plenty of fresh air (Hardyment, p.181). Though highly popular, the success of Truby King's rigorous feeding regimes remained doubtful according to Hardyment; it did not allow for difficult feeding cases and arguably left babies feeling hungry and neglected (Hardyment, p.179).

Freud's impact on maternal attitudes was less direct and less pragmatic than the enduring icon of the "Truby King Baby", as Hardyment observes:

Superficially, there is little evidence in popular baby-care manuals before the 1940s that much notice was taken of the implications of psychoanalytical thought for infant care [ . . . ] But Freud's theories did make themselves felt – they were in the academic if not the nursery air (Hardyment, p.165)

Writers of baby-care manuals revealed Freud's influence in their recommendations to parents to encourage self-control and social conscience in their children, a perspective that endorsed Freud's three-tier psyche of the id, ego and superego. Freud also inspired advice to parents on the matter of childhood trauma, though the childhood sexuality that underpinned his theory was never mentioned: parents were informed that they should avoid initiating traumas by distancing themselves from their children



and teaching independence (Hardyment, p.166). In *Women and a Changing Civilisation* Holtby finds Freud's impact on women's attitudes to mothering their children beneficial:

To-day there are attempts to investigate and remove possible causes of physical and mental handicap – from flat feet and constipation to fear of the dark and the Oedipus Complex. There is, I think, less possessiveness and more comradeship, less discipline and more understanding, less fuss and more instructed care. (*Women*, p.145).

Hardyment suggests that the 'Oedipus Complex' was perhaps 'the best known of Freud's psychological complexes' (Hardyment, p.167) and observes that it surfaced in many mothering manuals through descriptions of family jealousy and sibling rivalry. Holtby's understanding of Freud's concept, however, indicates that though it was a popular term, its precise meaning often remained unclear. In a light-hearted contribution to the *Radio Times* in 1930, she lampoons the modern fascination with complexes, querying 'would we rather find ourselves suffering from an inferiority complex, caused by an inability in our infant life to put our toes in our mouth, or from an Oedipus Complex caused by - well, I am never sure what causes the Oedipus Complex?'<sup>13</sup> Notably, Holtby's understanding of Freud's concept of the 'Oedipus Complex' is based on its popular reception as child pathology. For Freud, of course, the Oedipus Complex signified a normal process of development in every child, a fact of human existence rather than illness.

The 'inferiority complex' with which Holtby compares Freud's 'Oedipus complex' was another popular psychological term in baby-care manuals between the wars. Alfred Adler, another Viennese psychologist coined the term. Adler had started

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<sup>13</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Ssh! Do You Dream of Lions?', *Radio Times*, 19 December, 1930. Hull Archives.



out working closely with Freud; he was invited to join Freud's circle in 1902 and initially supported Freud's theories, even writing a defence of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Like Carl Jung, however, he soon dissented from orthodox Freudianism and finally broke away from the Freudian school of psychoanalysis in 1911, following a dispute with Freud over whether sexuality formed the main spring of psychical forces. In 1912, he formed the Society for Free Psycho-analytic Research and established his own journal, *Zeitschrift für Individualpsychologie* (Paper for Individual Psychology) in 1914. His school of Individual Psychology, replaced Freud's emphasis on sexual drives with Adler's own theory of striving for power. In *The Neurotic Constitution*, his first major non-Freudian work, he claimed that all neuroses in adults and children were caused by a feeling of inferiority.<sup>14</sup> Hardyment notes that Adler was more acceptable to writers of baby-care manuals on this basis: a baby striving for power over its family and environment was much less shocking than the idea of a baby driven by sexual desire for its parents. The 'inferiority complex' surfaced frequently in childcare advice and as Hardyment observes, Ethel Brereton wrote "The modern child is as much burdened with a sense of sin as the Victorian child but now we call it an inferiority complex".<sup>15</sup>

Holtby's attitude to the climate of opinion around mothering, infant care and child education engendered by Truby King, Freud and Adler is ambivalent. On one level, she certainly recognised the benefits but doubt lingered over whether they contributed to political trends that prioritised women as potential mothers at the expense of their intellectual, artistic, professional, industrial or political work. In her 1935 article, 'The Hitler in the Cradle', Holtby speculates whether the new theories

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<sup>14</sup> Alfred Adler, 'The Neurotic Constitution' (1912) in *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selections from his Writings*, ed. and annotated by Heinz L. Ansbacher, Ph.D. and Rowena R. Ansbacher, Ph.D. (New York: Basicbooks, 1956), p244.

<sup>15</sup> Ethel Brereton, *The Happy Nursery* (1927) cited in Hardyment, *Dream Babies*, p.168.



on infant care and mothercraft might actually prove detrimental to women and their position in society. She suggests that the time-consuming nature of raising children according to new psychological fashions encourages women to forfeit interests outside the home in order to live up to ideals of maternal devotion. Her article warns that such advances might start to work against women and society:

The new educational theories of self-expression, the psychological warnings against repressions and inhibitions have contributed most desirable knowledge for our enlightenment. But the newer theories exact more time and patience from parent and teacher than the old hit-or-miss discipline'.<sup>16</sup>

As an aunt and one-time teacher herself, Holtby asks whether women sacrifice too much of their own professional and personal interests, as well as their personal relations and vitality to raising their children. Whereas the nineteenth century child would have been left to the nanny, the interwar child, Holtby observes, has become the centre of the household. Moreover, Holtby gestures towards the adverse effect such theories might have on children. With all their mother's attention focused on them, Holtby suggests, children become spoiled and allowed to manipulate the whole household. Ultimately, Holtby argues, these new psychological fashions and mothercraft theories allow the child to become an embryonic dictator: 'I have visited households', she reports 'where five-year olds and six-year olds exercise a dictatorship as ruthless and dominating as any exacted by Hitler' ('The Hitler in the Cradle', 1935).

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<sup>16</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Hitler in the Cradle: A Modern Woman's Emphatic Protest Against the Tendency to Swing the Pendulum too far in the matter of Child-Rearing', *The Quiver*, June 1935. Hull Archives.



This is not to suggest, however, that Holtby felt new psychological theories on childrearing should be abandoned. In fact, despite grouping Truby King, Freud and Adler together in 1935 in their combined influence on maternal attitudes to baby care, Holtby had indicated from the late 1920s that Alfred Adler's theories on child education, based around the 'inferiority complex' were some of the most promising. In child-care manuals, like Ethel Brereton's *The Happy Nursery*, it was generally thought that the 'inferiority complex' in children could 'be easily dealt' with by ensuring that children felt equal to each other and that they were constantly praised (Hardyment, p.169). This interpretation of Adler's theory would seem responsible for the baby dictatorships observed by Holtby. Yet this was a misreading of Adler, as some physicians pointed out, claiming that an 'inferiority complex' could not be overcome by simply praising the child. Instead, it was believed that the child should be distanced from the parents and made to deal with the difficulties of life from the start (Hardyment, p.168-9). Holtby herself seems to have agreed with educational ideas derived from Adler that children should not be wrapped in cotton wool. Reflecting in 1929 on Adler's theories of education expounded in his most popular work, *Understanding Human Nature*, Holtby wonders whether her generation have benefited or incapacitated children by making education too much about praise and morale-boosting:

I was writing about education policy, when there flashed into my mind Adler's theory in 'Understanding Human Nature.' 'The basis of educability,' he wrote, 'lies in the striving of the child to compensate for his weaknesses. A thousand talents arise from the stimulus of inadequacy' [. . .] Does not the perfect nursery, the perfect school, render the child unfit for an imperfect world. If there were no sense of irritation or inferiority, no consciousness of obstacles to be overcome, would there be no striving?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Crumbs in the Bed: Irritant as Stimulant', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 March 1929, p.8.



In 1932, she returns to these speculations, relating her discussion with a London businessman on the benefits of Alderian theories of child education. Her businessman believes that 'Adler was right when he claimed that handicaps stimulated people to grow' and Holtby reflects on a world where discipline in schools was in decline, wondering whether Adler might be right after all.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Holtby had not only begun to contemplate how Adler's theories, if properly interpreted, might alleviate rather than exacerbate the situation of the 'Hitler in the Cradle', but also how Adler's theories might be turned against the cultural drive towards maternity itself. In a 1929 article, she attacks the eugenic obsessions with boosting population numbers and cautions against pressurising families to have more than one child. This is prompted by Holtby's experience of being mistaken for the mother of Britain's son whilst walking in the park and chastised for not yet bearing him a sibling. Holtby finishes with a polite request to such elderly people not to be 'tempted rashly to inflict their promiscuous Propaganda about Babies on the young'.<sup>19</sup> In another article, she returns to this issue and defends one-child families, once again warning people against indiscriminately criticising them. Outlining the detrimental effects of such criticism, she deploys Adler's concept of the 'inferiority complex' to the parents rather than the children: '[i]t can leave parents with an inferiority complex which emphasises those very evils which it is the desire of society to counteract'.<sup>20</sup> Burdened by the weight of baby boom propaganda, Holtby suggests here that only-child families develop psychological complexes about their failure to produce more children and, in order to compensate for their sense of social stigma, pay excessive attention to their only child which then turns out to be another spoilt little dictator.

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<sup>18</sup> Winifred Holtby, Notes on the Way, *Time and Tide*, 5 November, 1932, p.1206.

<sup>19</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Promiscuous Propaganda: The Indiscretions of Our Elders', *Manchester Guardian* 19 October 1929, p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Only-Child: Persecuting the Poor Parents', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 November 1929, p.8.



Of the many psychological theories on child-care between the wars, Holtby considers Alfred Adler's most extensively. She begins to point to ways in which Adler's theories, his concept of the 'inferiority complex' in particular, might prove a useful tool for identifying and understanding the 'big population theory' that gripped interwar Europe, most evidently in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy (*Women*, p.166). Not only this, her work begins to suggest that Adler's concept of the 'inferiority complex' might also offer a vantage point from which women might contest the cultural and political pressures towards motherhood.

### **Interwar Feminism and the 'Inferiority Complex'**

Holtby increasingly psychologised social and economic disparities using the 'inferiority complex' after 1928. It was a term that had been circulating within the feminist lexicon since the early 1920s but Holtby is one of the few feminists to use it, knowing that it is Adler's term, and to apply it to 'The Cult of the Cradle' and fascism.

The reception of Adler's terminology into broader psychological and popular discourse incurred a certain amount of confusion and misunderstanding. The 'inferiority complex' was described by one child psychologist as 'a much abused term . . . carelessly used by laymen'.<sup>21</sup> Adler himself even commented on this in the 1930s, acknowledging that his term had become 'world famous' but also admitting that many psychologists, let alone 'laymen', mistakenly used his term as a diagnostic rather than as a starting point for curing neuroses.<sup>22</sup> Simply telling someone they had an 'inferiority complex' was no help at all in Adler's view. 'The inferiority complex', Adler elaborates 'appears before a problem for which an individual is not properly

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Clare Hardyment, *Dream Babies*, p.169.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Adler, *What Life Should Mean To You*, ed. Alan Porter (London: George Allen And Unwin, 1932), p.49. Further references to this are denoted by *WLSMTY* in the main text.



adapted or equipped, and expresses his conviction that he is unable to solve it' (*WLSMTY*, p.52). The task of Individual Psychology is therefore to help the individual acquire the necessary capabilities to solve the 'inferiority complex'. All neurotics according to Adler have an 'inferiority complex'. The problem, however, was that as the term became popularised, the fine distinctions between the 'inferiority complex' and ordinary feelings of inferiority became blurred. Notions of mental pathology reserved for the 'inferiority complex' therefore also contaminated the concept of inferiority feelings so central to Adlerian psychology. Hertha Orgler, an important biographer and colleague of Adler's, encapsulates this well:

The term "Inferiority Complex" has become ubiquitous; one finds it in the newspapers and in novels as a common concept; many people use it constantly. But most of the people who are always making use of it do not know that the term was coined by Adler [. . .] The term is usually applied wrongly; one usually means inferiority feeling when one speaks of an Inferiority Complex. Adler has given this latter concept a much deeper meaning; he draws a sharp distinction between inferiority feeling and Inferiority Complex. Adler regards the inferiority feeling as a stimulus to every upward striving . . . he perceives a great danger in the Inferiority Complex. Whenever he revealed the life-styles of failures, he always found an Inferiority Complex.<sup>23</sup>

For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to bear in mind therefore that Adler's definition of an 'inferiority complex' was an individual's 'inability to solve life's problems'. For the purposes of this chapter, Adler's recognition of how the 'inferiority complex' might also ironically manifest itself through acts of superiority is crucial. Neurotics suffering from 'inferiority complexes', according to Adler, often

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<sup>23</sup> Hertha Orgler, *Alfred Adler, The Man and His Work: Triumph over the Inferiority Complex* (London: C. W. Daniel Co, 1939), p.91.



deny such feelings of inferiority and their causes; instead, they assume a compensatory feeling of superiority. To explain this, Adler offers the important distinction between the 'inferiority complex' and inferiority feelings:

All human beings suffer feelings of inferiority at some point but it is how and whether they can overcome the difficulties which make them feel inferior which matter. No human being can stand feeling inferior without creating some tension. But if an individual is discouraged from thinking that he can effect any realistic improvement for himself through his own efforts then he masks it with superiority - becomes intoxicated by false presumptions of superiority. But inferiority feelings will accumulate because the situation which creates them cannot really be altered. (*WLSMTY*, p.51).

In other words, everyone in Adler's view experiences 'feelings of inferiority' but it is when the individual cannot find an adequate solution to them that they become an 'inferiority complex' and this can manifest itself as a superficial show of 'superiority'. Adler offers some examples of this, such as the man who compensates for insurmountable feelings of inferiority at work by acting as a tyrant in the home over his family. Another is the individual who adopts an overtly arrogant attitude to compensate for their fear of being ignored (*WLSMTY*, pp.51-52). Importantly, feelings of inferiority that find a creative solution are, however, regarded as 'normal' by Adlerian psychology; they are integral to self-development and the general improvement of mankind. Orgler therefore even recounts an instance when Adler concluded a lecture with the words "I wish you all a creative inferiority feeling" (Orgler, p.91).

Other feminists, in addition to Holtby, had adopted the 'inferiority complex' to a psychological analysis of women's social, economic and political position. For



instance, in 1921, Anne Martin had explored the effects of women's 'inferiority complex' in an article for *Time and Tide*, surmising that:

Many women are in the grip of an "inferiority complex." Otherwise we would not continue to endure the double-standards and the consequent limitation of opportunity, not only through man's actual control of the material world, but through his almost exclusive interpretation of woman.<sup>24</sup>

Vera Brittain also applied the term 'inferiority complex' variously in *Testament of Youth*, using it to describe unsuccessful girls at provincial Buxton society dance parties and how she felt as a V.A.D (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse, working the stultifying routine of a civilian nurse.<sup>25</sup> As Barbara Caine observes, there was a general trend amongst feminists at this time towards adopting the term:

"Woman's inferiority complex" was a particularly common theme in the 1920s and 1930s, replacing the nineteenth century concern about the extent to which women were *really* equal to men in ability with an argument about the effects on women of centuries of discrimination, injustice and insistence on traditional beliefs about their innate domesticity and ignorance.<sup>26</sup>

Caine stresses the growth of a feminist psychological approach and locates Holtby's writing and thought firmly within it: '[i]n the 1930s Winifred Holtby related women's low pay with low self-esteem and with the widespread existence of an 'inferiority complex' amongst them' (Caine, p.213).

<sup>24</sup> Anne Martin, 'Woman's Inferiority Complex', *Time and Tide*, Aug 4, 1922, p.733-734 (733).

<sup>25</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, preface by Rt. Hon. Shirley Williams (London: Virago, 1978; repr. 1999; first pub. Victor Gollancz, 1933), p.51 and p.451.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p.214.



Though Caine's analysis highlights the importance of the 'inferiority complex' to the growth of early twentieth century feminist theory and Holtby's contribution to this turn in feminist thought, her overview does not consider how Holtby's use of the 'inferiority complex' differed from other interwar feminists. First, Holtby was acquainted with Adler's most famous work, *Understanding Human Nature*, and, unlike many other feminists, knew that Adler coined the term 'inferiority complex'. Martin for instance in her 1922 article for *Time and Tide*, 'Woman's Inferiority Complex', mistakenly describes the 'inferiority complex' as a 'Freudian complex'.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, Holtby moved beyond applying the 'inferiority complex' only to women and their need to overcome its symptoms. Again, this was a view typified by Martin in her call for women to overcome their innate 'inferiority complex': '[t]he chief obstacle is not men – it is the humbleness, the timidity, the fear in the hearts and minds of women themselves, planted there by centuries of teaching that woman is the inferior sex'.<sup>28</sup> Holtby's work moves beyond this position to argue that both men and women suffer from 'inferiority complexes' that lead to fascist calls for sexual division.

Holtby's most direct deployment of Adler's concept of the 'inferiority complex' surfaces in *Women and a Changing Civilisation*. Here, she devotes a sub-chapter to woman's 'inferiority complex', arguing that women are adversely infected by the pervasive influence of stereotyped gender roles. 'It is much more', she suggests, 'that at the top of every – or almost every tree – the girl sees, not an older woman seated, but a man' (*Women*, p.100). At the root of this, in Holtby's view, is the traditional view of man as conquering warrior and woman as child-bearer which is endemic to every area of social interaction and imposes a strong subliminal influence on children:

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<sup>27</sup> Anne Martin, 'Woman's Inferiority Complex', *Time and Tide*, Aug 4, 1922, p.733-734 (734).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.733.



The picture of the man striding forward to conquer new worlds and the woman following wearily behind, a baby in her arms, is imprinted deeply on the racial imagination. It colours our half-conscious phrases, our emotions, the very emphasis with which we speak and the tones of our voice. Children learn from these before they can even distinguish the sense of individual words. Boys and girls alike observe from their infancy that the policeman magnificently directing the traffic at the cross-roads is a man; the engine driver is a man; the prime minister, the sweep, the lamplighter and the King [. . .] all these are men. (*Women*, p.98)

Everywhere women look, Holtby observes, they are confronted by images of male authority and superiority, and each time their own feelings of inferiority are inscribed deeper. Even before children understand linguistic meaning, they absorb meaning from 'half-conscious phrases' and 'emotions'. It is these emotions, Holtby stresses, which shape us from earliest infancy and create the cultural and political climate that necessitates feminist demands for equality. In Holtby's analysis, women are encouraged to belittle themselves and especially in her generation to feel their social contribution and sacrifices forever dwarfed by the military heroism of men during the First World War. '[T]his tendency to consider everybody's interests more important than their own is', in Holtby's opinion, 'one of the major expressions of women's inferiority complex' (*Women*, p.104).

Holtby's image of the child imbibing gendered power hierarchies from their earliest memories strongly echoes Adler's diagnosis of women's inferiority feelings. Holtby describes how young girls internalise a sense of their lesser worth compared to men. Adler also affirms this in *Understanding Human Nature*, when he explains 'that a girl comes into the world with a prejudice sounding in her ears which is designed



only to rob her of her belief in her own value'.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, he believes as Holtby does in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* that children are affected from an early age by cultural attitudes that they do not necessarily understand:

All our institutions, our traditional attitudes, our laws, our morals, our customs, give evidence to the fact that they are determined and maintained by privileged males for the glory of male domination, thus creating the appearance of "masculine privileges." These institutions reach out even into the very nurseries and have a great influence upon the child's soul. A child's understanding of these relationships need not be very great, but we must admit that his emotional life is immensely affected by them. (*UHN*, p.101)

More than simply suggesting that tradition indoctrinates women with a sense of lesser worth, Adler implies that tradition itself is a manufactured sham, merely 'the appearance of "masculine privileges"'. 'If we investigate the situation of the girls more closely' he informs us 'we learn that the story of the lesser capability of woman is a palpable lie' (*UHN*, p.130). 'Masculine dominance' he assures us, 'therefore is not a natural thing' and '[t]his is indicated by the numerous laws which are necessary legally to guarantee this domination to men' (*UHN*, p.123). In a similar vein, Holtby claims women's war work during the First World War effectively exploded the myth of female inferiority. They had been told', Holtby observes, 'that certain processes were beyond their power. It was a lie. During the war they had proved it to be so, by their own skill and efficiency' (*Women*, p.112).

The echoes between Holtby's description of the 'inferiority complex' and Adler's *Understanding Human Nature* demonstrate that Holtby's understanding of the 'inferiority complex' was more specific than that of most laypeople and feminist

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<sup>29</sup> Alfred Adler *Understanding Human Nature* trans. Béran Wolfe (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1927), p.131. Further references to this work are denoted by *UHN* in the main text.



thinkers. Certainly, she does not understand it to the degree of Adler's biographer, Herther Orgler, but then neither is she as confused about the term's origin as Orgler implies of the majority. She does at least know that the 'inferiority complex' is Adler's concept. Furthermore, in a 1934 article entitled 'Fear and the Woman Who Earns', she demonstrates a detailed textual knowledge of *Understanding Human Nature*. The quote cited refers directly to Adler's section on 'Sex' in the 1927 English translation of this work:

'The degradation of woman and womanly labour,' the psychologist Adler wrote, 'is further indicated by the fact that women are paid less than men, regardless of whether their work is of equal value . . . so long as we cannot guarantee every woman an absolute equality with man we cannot demand her complete reconciliation with life, with the facts of our civilisation and the forms of our social life'.

This is going far; but does it go too far? Looking round on a world where resentment and suspicion so often exist when there should be only mutual respect and understanding, where antagonism too often replaces co-operation, and where a hot emotion of anger overcomes men who see girl typists crowding city buses, while the girls resent what they feel to be masculine patronage and jealousy, can we deny that the Austrian psychologist has some claim to be heard?<sup>30</sup>

Noticeably, Holtby does not apply the term 'inferiority complex', though it might easily be used to describe women's attitudes towards inequality in the work place and men's sense of women threatening their dominance on the job market. The reason is perhaps that this translation of Adler by Béran Wolfe elects not to privilege the term 'inferiority complex' anywhere in the edition. The development towards careful

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<sup>30</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Fear and the Woman who Earns', *News Chronicle*, 9 March 1934 in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.81-83 (p.83). The quote from Alfred Adler here is cited from *Understanding Human Nature* trans. Béran Wolfe (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1927), pp.131-135.



definition of this term appears only to have been achieved in Adler's 1930s work, such as *What Life Should Mean to You*, cited above, and translated into English in 1932.

It is clear, however, that Holtby does understand something of the details of Adlerian psychology in this 1934 article. The quote from *Understanding Human Nature* with its ellipses spans five pages in Wolfe's translation. Holtby defends Adler's relevance to the 1930s climate of depression and unemployment by further drawing on the quote's context within the book as a whole. She explains Adler's pertinence to the argument by underlining the importance of feelings such as 'anger' and 'jealousy'. These are all emotions to which Adler devotes attention in *Understanding Human Nature*. Anger is classed as a 'disjunctive affect' by Adler and described as the most obvious negation of social feeling. It articulates the individual's sense of inferiority re-worked into attention-seeking, dominative behaviour. 'In paroxysms of rage, the whole gamut of inferiority and superiority appears with utter clarity' according to Adler, and becomes 'a cheap trick whereby the personal evaluation is raised at the cost of another's misfortunes' (*UHN*, p.269). 'Jealousy' proves even more central to Adler's concept of inferiority feelings and striving: 'jealousy is an especially well-marked form of the striving for power' (*UHN*, p.223). Adler observes that it can take many different forms, amongst them is 'senseless opposition' and 'the restriction of another's freedom' (*UHN*, p.223). This is exactly what Holtby points to in her 1934 article, namely that male jealousy of women's success in the labour market engenders 'patronage' as an attempt to dominate women and confine them to the domestic sphere.

Holtby's use of the term 'inferiority complex' and the citation from *Understanding Human Nature* in her 1934 article, 'Fear and the Woman Who Earns',



strongly indicates that she found Adler's psychological theory more adaptable to her feminist politics than Freud's psychoanalysis. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Holtby rejected Freud's theory because its reception into popular discourse had served to prioritise biological instinct as the basis for sexual division. Adler, it would seem, appealed to Holtby precisely because his Individual Psychology looked beyond sexual drives and instinct. He sought to explain the differences between the sexes through environmental and social factors that triggered feelings of inferiority.

Why Holtby, a feminist and broadly liberal, egalitarian intellectual, might have been drawn to Adler's work is perhaps self-evident from her reference to *Understanding Human Nature*, in 'Fear and the Woman Who Earns'. Adler believed women deserved political, social and economic equality with men. His chapter on 'Sex' in *Understanding Human Nature* offers one of the clearest statements of this:

We have no reason to combat the former purposes of the emancipation-for-women movements. It is our duty to support them in their efforts to gain freedom and equality, because finally the happiness of the whole of humanity depends upon effecting such conditions that a women will be enabled to be reconciled with her womanly role, just as the possibility of man's adequate solution of his relationship to woman, likewise depends upon it. (*Understanding Human Nature*, p.146-7)

Adler's outlook here supports Holtby's belief in women's economic emancipation. He also subtly draws on similar Socialist feminist arguments, asserting that without economic independence, feelings of inequality arise in women, producing destructive anti-social feelings of envy and anger which if not properly directed may develop into neuroses. In Adler's opinion, it is this frustration at being economically, intellectually and spiritually stifled that produces neuroses and antagonism between men and



women. '[F]reedom and equality' are central in his theory to improving relations between the sexes.

Perhaps, for this reason, two of Adler's major biographers and disseminators in Britain were women. (Though, of course, the spread of Freud's psychoanalytic theories also owed much to women such as his daughter, Anna Freud and Melanie Klein.) Both Hertha Orgler, a woman who had trained under Adler and worked very closely with him in his Viennese circle and Phyllis Bottome, who met Adler in 1927 whilst working in Europe, attested Adler's strong support for feminism.<sup>31</sup> Hertha Orgler, acclaimed by Adler himself as 'the standard bearer of Individual Psychology' published her biography of Adler in 1939, in which she unequivocally shares Holtby's reception of Adler as a feminist thinker:

The objection might be raised that I have emphasised so strongly the equality in value of women because I am a woman myself. I should like, therefore, to point out that Adler has always stressed the fact, in his books and lectures, that the "superstition" about women's inferiority has caused enormous damage to the mental development of men and women.<sup>32</sup>

Elsewhere in the biography, Orgler incorporates letters from other women, similarly expressing their admiration for Adler. One woman, an eminent Danish sculptor, records her words of gratitude to Adler on meeting him, 'What you have written to explain the psychology of superiority by men towards women is of great value to them in striving for self-adjustment to their natural place in society' (Orgler, p.207). Phyllis Bottome also published her biography of Adler in 1939. She describes him as

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<sup>31</sup> Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p.216 and p.229.

<sup>32</sup> Hertha Orgler, *Alfred Adler, The Man and His Work: Triumph over the Inferiority Complex* (London: C. W. Daniel Co, 1939), p.94.



'a champion of women's rights, perhaps the greatest champion that women have ever had – because the least wholesale and the most searchingly practical'.<sup>33</sup>

Adler was able to refute the 'inferiority' of woman as a patriarchal myth because unlike Freud, his understanding of femininity was not grounded in concepts of sexual difference such as penis envy and the castration complex. Karen Offen identifies Adler as pro-feminist on this basis, claiming that 'Alfred Adler was one of the few European psychoanalysts who whole-heartedly supported women's emancipation'.<sup>34</sup>

This is, however, a problematic feminist appraisal of Adler's superiority to Freud.

Many feminists, particularly following Juliet Mitchell's work, would contest the suggestion that Freud was a biological essentialist.<sup>35</sup> Adler, himself, however certainly believed that his psychological theory undermined the sexual emphasis of Freud's. For example, in one of the few papers where he outlines the differences between his Individual Psychology and psychoanalysis, Adler claims the castration complex on which Freud bases his theory of sexual difference is better explained by Adler's own theory of striving and feelings of inferiority:

Some psychoanalysts have themselves pointed out that the castration complex has developed from the "masculine protest." In our culture, the error is inherent to regard the feminine form and behaviour as inferior, as a diminished form of life. In *The*

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<sup>33</sup> Phyllis Bottome, *Alfred Adler: Apostle of Freedom* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), p.197.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Offen, *European Feminisms 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.274.

<sup>35</sup> Juliet Mitchell famously counters feminist opposition to Freud by stressing that Freud articulated the formation of sexual differences *between* the biological and social background and as such opened up a way for feminists to understand women's oppression under the law of the father. See Juliet Mitchell, 'On Freud and the Distinction Between the Sexes' (1974) in *Women the Longest Revolution: Essays on Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1984), pp.221-232 (p.228). Toril Moi has also refuted feminist charges of biological essentialism laid against Freud by unpicking the semantic and linguistic nuances as well as the cultural political context of Freud's notorious claim 'anatomy is destiny'. See Toril Moi, 'Is Anatomy Destiny? Freud and Biological Determinism' in *Whose Freud? The Place of Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* ed. Peter Brooks and Alex Woloch (London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp.71-92, *passim*.



*Neurotic Constitution* cases are described of patients who express their feeling of being diminished by talking of loss of penis.<sup>36</sup>

*The Neurotic Constitution* was Adler's first full-length study following his split from Freud and in it he suggests, as he does in the above quote, that Freud's emphasis on the fear of losing the penis is simply a means by which some, not all, individuals express their sense of inferiority. For Adler the fear of castration is therefore an expression of the individual psyche rather than a formative factor. The 'masculine protest'<sup>1</sup> was one of Adler's early concepts and was pivotal to his break with Freud, even though, as Adler claims in 1931, Freud later re-worked it into the castration complex for psychoanalysis. The 'masculine protest' replaced what Adler read as Freud's stress on anatomical sexual differences and sexual drives. It referred to sex figuratively and emphasised feelings of inferiority and the importance of striving over instinctual needs. The 'masculine protest' stood for an individual's desire to overcome feelings of inferiority and strive to become a figurative 'real man'. Adler summarises it succinctly in the 1930s:

From the sense of female inferiority, which most people, men and women alike, possess, both sexes have developed an overstraining for masculinity, a superiority which is often extremely harmful, a will to conquer all difficulties of life in the masculine fashion, which I have called the *masculine protest*.<sup>37</sup>

Freud openly rejected Adler's 'masculine protest' in his 1914 paper 'On Narcissism' on the basis that it replaced his libido theory with a more general concept of striving

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<sup>36</sup> Alfred Adler, 'The Differences Between Individual Psychology and Psychoanalysis (1931) in *Alfred Adler, Superiority And Social Interest: A Collection Of Later Writings*, ed. Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher with a biographical essay by Carl Furtmueller (London: Routledge, 1965), pp.205-218 (p.209).

<sup>37</sup> Alfred Adler, 'Individual Psychology in Psychologies of the 1930s', ed. Carl Murchison, *International University Series In Psychology* (Worcester: Clark University Press, 1930), p.395-405 (p.398).



for power and critiqued its use as a diagnostic of repression in 1919.<sup>38</sup> A female pupil of Freud's, Lou-Andreas Salomé, despite having some sympathies with Adler's views, also rejected his 'masculine protest' because it, in Lisa Appignanesi's and John Forrester's words, 'led to a negative estimate of women', a charge which they also wryly point out she never levelled at Freud.<sup>39</sup> Andreas-Salomé's criticism of the reductive tendency in Adler's early concept of the 'masculine protest' is perhaps justified. Despite its aim to use sex distinction figuratively, it still succeeded in maintaining gender stereotypes, associating masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity.

Freud continued to return to Adler's concept of the 'masculine protest' until the end of his life, with increasing acceptance. Adler himself, however, rapidly redefined the term during the 1920s. From his early formulations around the 'masculine protest', Adler narrowed down its application to refer specifically to a woman's rejection of the feminine role forced on her by a male-dominated society. In *Understanding Human Nature*, Adler notes '[t]he obvious advantages of being a man have caused severe disturbances in the psychic development of women as a consequence of which there is an almost universal dissatisfaction with the feminine rôle' (*UHN*, p.133). As he elaborates here, such dissatisfaction elicits various different responses amongst women. Some act out a more 'masculine' role since there is no other role to play, becoming active and ambitious and partaking in male sports and rejecting marriage and domesticity. Others resign themselves to an inferior position and, though they marry, constantly voice rebellion through hysterical illness. Finally, some women seem whole-heartedly to accept their inferior position to men but use

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<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism' in *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1973), II, 79-96 (p.86-87). Sigmund Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1919e) in *On Psychopathology*, vols 15 (London: Penguin, 1993), X, 163-193 (189-93).

<sup>39</sup> Lisa Appignanesi And John Forrester, *Freud's Women* (London: Penguin, 2000; First Pub. Orion, 1992), p.261.



this to gain control in the domestic sphere, for example shifting all responsibilities onto the husband (*UHN*, pp.134-136). Adler's development of the 'masculine protest' in this direction represents it as a specific example of 'striving for power'. It shows how different women will respond to the sense of inferiority placed on their gender in a male-dominated society. Adler, however, never quite clarifies whether he regards it as a normal or pathological psychic state. At times, it seems to be emblematic of both health and neurosis in women and the distinction between the two is a question of intensity. In 1933 for example, he defines it thus:

The girl under the influence of our present-day cultural pressures, develops a pronounced feeling of inferiority and pushes on vigorously. She thus discloses a more thorough training which often gives her marked traits of greater energy. This is the prelude to the masculine protest, which in the development of girls can produce a vast number of both good and bad consequences; these comprise all sorts of human excellencies and short-comings, possibly leading to the rejection of love or homosexuality.<sup>40</sup>

Dilute forms of the 'masculine protest' appear beneficial, inspiring women to greater heights of achievement. Adler speculates, however, that in extreme cases, 'the "masculine protest" plays a disastrous part in the performance of wifely functions and in the refusal of child-bearing' and may sometimes 'give rise to menstrual troubles and functional disorders in the sexual sphere' (*Social Interest*, p.64). Note here Adler's reversal of popular psychological attitudes to female sexuality between the wars, derived from sexology and psychoanalysis. Where they claimed that the lack of sexual activity, sexual anaesthesia or childlessness in women produced hysterical

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<sup>40</sup> Alfred Adler, *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind*, trans. John A. Linton, M.A., and Richard Vaughan (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), p.234. Page references are hereafter denoted in the main text as *Social Interest*.



and anti-social behaviour, Adler maintained that feeling undervalued produced these physical symptoms.<sup>41</sup>

Adler's thoughts on the devaluation of woman and the 'masculine protest' are echoed in Freud's writing on femininity. There is evidence to suggest that Freud had in mind Adler's theory of the 'masculine protest' and inferiority feelings as he puzzled over the enigma of woman. Adler developed his initial formulations based on organ inferiority into a broader schema of striving to overcome feelings of inferiority and his concept of the 'masculine protest' was the starting point for this. Freud seems to have adopted the 'masculine protest' into his theory in relation to its earlier associations with organ inferiority and uses it to describe feminine penis-envy. In his early essay 'The Taboo of Virginity', for instance, Freud explains female hostility towards men during and after their defloration as symptomatic of their penis-envy, suggesting that 'the designation of "masculine protest" fits the behaviour; the phrase was coined by Adler [1910]'.<sup>42</sup> As a result, Freud's later views on the little girl's entry into femininity from the pre-oedipal phallic phase is predicated on her recognition of her own lack and her rejection of what she perceives to be her own inferior organ. Adler's early theories explored how an individual's organ inferiorities and disabilities generated feelings of inferiority that affected social relationships. Freud adapts this to his theory to claim that femininity is produced by the little girl's recognition of the clitoris as an inferior organ when compared to the penis.<sup>43</sup> This leads Freud to make similar observations to Adler on

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<sup>41</sup> See for example Anthony Ludovici, *Woman: A Vindication* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1923) and Charlotte Haldane, *Motherhood and its Enemies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927) discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Taboo of Virginity' (1917) in *On Sexuality*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1973), VII, 265-283 (278).

<sup>43</sup> In his 1925 essay, Freud asserts that the boy's fear of castration ends his oedipal attachment to the mother whereas the girl's recognition of her own irreversible castration and her inferior phallic organ ends her pre-oedipal attachment to the mother and only marks the start of her oedipal attachment to the parent of the opposite sex. Freud claims 'this fact represents the core of the



the acceptance and rejection of the feminine role. In his 1933 essay, 'On Femininity', Freud also identifies three types of woman:

The discovery that she is castrated is a turning point in the girl's growth. Three possible lines of development start from it: one leads to sexual inhibition or to neurosis, the second to change of character in the sense of a masculinity complex, the third, finally to normal femininity.<sup>44</sup>

Like Adler, we see that Freud identifies a type of woman who rebels against the feminine role. For Freud, such a woman reverts to the 'masculine' or active sexuality of the pre-oedipal phallic phase. Adler explains the expression of this 'masculine protest' on a social and cultural level; such women in his view reject domesticity for competitive sports and masculine occupations. Freud and Adler are, however, agreed that the extreme expression of this active rebellion against the feminine role is same-sex desire. Just as Adler sees it 'leading to the rejection of love or homosexuality' (*Social Interest*, p.234), Freud claims '[t]he extreme achievement of such a masculinity complex would appear to be the influencing of the choice of an object in the sense of manifest homosexuality' (Freud, 'On Femininity', p.164). Although Freud and Adler arrive at a similar understanding that the devaluation of women can produce feminine rebellion in some cases, Adler maintained that they each placed a different emphasis on the 'masculine protest'. Adler felt that Freud constricted the more general insights into human nature present in the 'masculine protest' by

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truth contained in Adler's theory . . . explaining the whole world by this single point ("organ inferiority", the "masculine protest", "breaking away from the feminine line"). In Freud's view, 'the only organ which could claim to be called "inferior" without any ambiguity would be the clitoris'. See Sigmund Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction of the Sexes' (1925) in *On Sexuality*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1973), VII, 323-343 (337).

<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On Femininity' (1933) in *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis*, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1991; first pub. 1973), II, 145-169 (160).



adapting it to describe the little-girls' response to her castration and her subsequent penis-envy. As Adler observes in 1930:

Freud has made use of this discovery of Individual Psychology and has pressed it into his sexual scheme under the name of the "castration complex", holding that it is simply the want of a male genital organ that creates the feeling of inferiority (*Social Interest*, p.234).

For Adler, it was the social and economic devaluation of women that created the 'masculine protest' and not their lack of a penis. As a result, he advised that '[e]arly instruction [. . .] should be given in all cases about the equal worth of the sexes and about the child's own sexual role' (*Social Interest*, p.228). Rather than organ deficiency, Adler increasingly prioritised the social cause and effects of the individual's sense of inferiority.

Out of Adler's theory of the 'masculine protest' therefore emerged the broader concepts of striving and 'inferiority feelings': feelings experienced by every individual at some point when they feel unequal to those around them, perhaps because of ill-health, physical inferiority or poor intelligence. This developed into a more general framework for his theory constructed from the perspective of the normal, healthy individual rather than the neurotic and centred on the striving for superiority. As he clarifies in 1930, '[w]hatever premises all our philosophers and psychologists dream of - self-preservation, pleasure principle equalization - all these are but vague representations, attempts to express the great upward drive'.<sup>45</sup> This striving from an inferior to superior position, from below to above, becomes central to his theory. He claims that all human nature is typified by this universal striving to better their relation to their surrounding environment: 'Indeed, it seems to me that all

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<sup>45</sup> Alfred Adler, 'Individual Psychology' (1930f) (p.103) in Ansbacher, pp.398-99.



human culture is based on feelings of inferiority' (*WLSMTY*, p.55). As such, his concept of the human psyche was grounded in the principle that every individual strives for equality with others. Like the 'masculine protest', these feelings of inferiority could be a spur to greater achievement or they could result in mental illness if the individual could not find a suitable way of overcoming them.

From this line of thought emerged the more popularly known term, the 'inferiority complex' which could be used to sum up the difficulties faced by individuals thwarted in their aims to achieve power over their environment. In this way, what perhaps started out as a concept that endorsed differences of masculine activity and feminine passivity ultimately surmounted them and erased sexual difference as the defining factor in psychic development. The eventual non-gendered concept of the 'inferiority complex' proved highly flexible and adaptable. Many interwar feminists adapted it to their psychological critique of women's sense of inequality and as we see in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* Holtby was one such feminist. Yet she also moved beyond this to consider the effects of the 'inferiority complex' in political trends like nationalism and fascism, both of which, in Holtby's view, were responsible for 'The Cult of the Cradle'.

### **The 'Inferiority Complex' Across the Political Spectrum**

Adler's concept of the 'inferiority complex' proved a useful analytical tool for analysing women's sense of inferiority in the home and workplace. Holtby, however, was keen to look beyond the idea that women had merely to shrug off their 'inferiority complexes' in order to help themselves. For her, the situation was more complicated than that, especially with the gathering popularity of 'The Cult of the Cradle' during the 1930s. Women were confronted on all sides by the impetus to



return to the home and bear children; they were charged with stealing men's jobs and exacerbating unemployment levels, as well as neglecting their maternal duties should they attempt to balance career and home. Holtby argues that the 'inferiority complex' pervaded society at all levels and was endemic to men and women alike. She therefore signals to how 'The Cult of the Cradle', nationalism and fascism can all be read as manifestations of a widespread cultural 'inferiority complex' of which women's 'inferiority complex' is only one part.

The straightforward style of Adler's work lent itself to easy reception and adaptation by intelligent lay thinkers like Holtby. In the 1927 preface to the English translation of *Understanding Human Nature*, Béran Wolfe, an important disseminator of Adler's work in Britain, makes it clear that *Understanding Human Nature* was purposefully written to be intelligible to the literate adult as part of its self-help ethos. Individual Psychology rose to prominence by establishing 'free child guidance clinics' in Vienna (*UHN*, p.vii) and then sought to effect the same success in adults. Adler believed that if every adult could apply the insights of Individual Psychology to him or herself then he or she could enhance their understanding of themselves and their relations to others and render life more meaningful. He closes *Understanding Human Nature* by reaffirming that '[t]he understanding of human nature seems to us indispensable to every man' (*UHN*, p.286). The book itself, as Wolfe explains, 'represents a year of . . . lectures' held at the 'People's Institute of Vienna' for the general public which Wolfe himself attended (*UHN*, pp.viii-ix). For students of Individual Psychology and educators, *Understanding Human Nature* is intended simply as an introduction and not a definitive text. As Wolfe stresses, '[i]t is to the average intelligent adult that *Understanding Human Nature* will have the greatest appeal' (*UHN*, p.ix). Other commentators on the dissemination of Adler's Individual



Psychology in Britain and the United States concur with this. Orgler observes that Adler's '*Understanding Human Nature* had the widest circulation' (Orgler, p.201) and documents the growth of Individual Psychology in Britain in the late 1920s through lay societies (Orgler, pp.201-205). Another of Adler's biographers similarly confirms his appeal to lay intellectuals outside of the specifically psychoanalytical circles. She too remarks on the intentional accessibility of certain of Adler's works, 'specially written to meet the needs of the general public, and generally scoffed at by those who wish to keep their psychiatry above the heads of laymen who might profit by it.'<sup>46</sup>

Holtby did not choose to apply Adler's psychology to herself so much as to direct its critical gaze towards the world around her. Increasingly, she adapted the concept of 'inferiority complex' to diagnose the political trends that produced 'The Cult of the Cradle'. This application of Adler to a psychological critique of fascism and nationalism and its adverse effects on women might well have been influenced by Holtby's correspondence and conversations with her best friend's husband, George Catlin. From 1926, Holtby lived in London with Vera Brittain. Brittain's 'semi-detached' marriage meant that she lived fulltime with Holtby and that her husband worked for half the year in the United States. (The other half of the year, he spent in London with Brittain and Holtby.) During his times away in the United States, he corresponded with both his wife and with Holtby. Catlin was well aware of Adler's theory of Individual Psychology and its applicability to social and political analysis. In a 1930 review of Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Catlin elucidates his position in the interwar psychological debates: 'this book marks a revolution in Dr. Freud's thought which is of singular interest to those of us who have based our

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<sup>46</sup> Phyllis Bottome, *Alfred Adler: Apostle of Freedom* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), pp.340-341.



psychology on Adler's doctrine of self-assertion and of the instinctive pursuit of power'.<sup>47</sup> Catlin's perspective is shaped by his commitment to an Adlerian perspective. To him, Freud now appears 'no Freudian' because *Civilisation and Its Discontents* veers away from the libido theory, over which Adler had broken with Freud, to posit the concomitant existence of the death instinct. Though Catlin does not state it explicitly here, there is the sense that Freud has followed Adler's footsteps in positing the aggressive drive on an equal footing with the sexual one, his 'Death and Eros'.<sup>48</sup> Catlin possessed a detailed knowledge of both Freud and Adler, enough to debate theoretical discrepancies and modifications. There is some evidence in their correspondence that Holtby and Catlin discussed issues of psychology. In an undated letter on the subject of Holtby's fraught relationship with Harry Pearson, Catlin for example diagnoses the problem with Harry as 'a sister complex'.<sup>49</sup>

Initially it seems these discussions were centred on their personal lives, Holtby's virginity and Catlin and Brittain's marital problems in particular. Increasingly, however, these psychological discussions spanned out into political analyses. Catlin never expounds on Adler in any of this correspondence as he does in the 1930 review but there is much evidence here to suggest that he is increasingly applying psychological concepts in order to understand 1930s politics and the growth of fascism. For instance, in May 1934, he writes to Holtby deliberating over his political

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<sup>47</sup> C.E.G.Catlin, 'Freud No Freudian', *The Saturday Review* (1930) in *Freud without Hindsight: Reviews of his Work (1893-1939)*, ed. Normal Kiell, trans from German Vladimir Rus, PhD and trans. from French Denise Boneau (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1988), pp.595-597 (p.596).

<sup>48</sup> Adler had raised the concept of the aggressive drive in 1908 and though Freud acknowledges this in 1909, he refused to fully accept a non-erotic aggressive drive on the same footing with the sexual drive for 22 years. By this time, Adler had subordinated the aggressive drive to his more over-arching theory of striving for power, of which the aggressive drive was a pathological manifestation. See <sup>48</sup> Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher, *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selections from his Writings*, (New York: Basicbooks, 1956), pp.37-39.

<sup>49</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, George Catlin Letters to Winifred Holtby, Undated, fol. 26.



stance and debating whether a Socialist position is the best antidote to fascism. The problem is that he finds Socialism inherently flawed:

Now I literally loathe the thesis of the class-war: it seems to be fallacious, unusual and stupid. It is a kind of pseudo-realism that just prevents things being done. And Marxism is nominally realistic logic but actually a sensational gospel of hate, of envy, of the inferiority complex [. . .] It assumes that all the previous foreign and colonial relations of this country are to be explained on the basis of capitalist exploitation.<sup>50</sup>

Catlin's analysis of Marxism and his grounds for refuting it draw on the Adlerian concept of the 'inferiority complex'. Instead of the rational position that he seeks, he finds Marxism only offers those negative emotions of the 'inferiority complex' such as 'hate' and 'envy' which Adler identifies in *Understanding Human Nature* as contingent with a lack of social feeling. Envy is associated with a maladjusted striving for power in Adler's schema which disregards the commonweal for personal gain. 'Envy', he even suggests, 'may go so far as to lead a man to take pleasure in the pain of his neighbour' (*UHN*, p.226). 'Hate' too is connected with overt and covert intentions to put oneself above others by harming them. Adler associates it with 'misanthropy' and 'negligence' (*UHN*, pp.229-231). In this light, Catlin ironically diagnoses Socialism with a neurotic inability to overcome feelings of class inferiority and to be fundamentally lacking in social feeling towards others.

Adler himself seems to encourage his readers to examine their cultural and political institutions in the light of the 'inferiority complex' and to read their world in precisely the way Catlin and Holtby do. The vast applicability of his concept, not only to infantile development but also to social economic and political situations

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<sup>50</sup> William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University, Mills Memorial Library, Canada, George Catlin Letters to Winifred Holtby, 19 May, 1934, Box 158.



encountered by children and adults alike in daily life, is acknowledged in *Understanding Human Nature*. As Adler observes, 'Human beings are very sensitive media for the development of inferiority complexes of all kinds' (*UHN*, p.166) and the 'inferiority complex' therefore 'holds good for the individual, as well as for a crowd' (*UHN*, p.226). Some of these different kinds of 'inferiority complex' are outlined here. For instance, he suggests that whole nations can feel inferior to one another, that the working class feel inferior to the aristocracy, and that women are made to feel inferior to men: '[t]he question of submission not only plays a role in the relationship of the sexes [. . .] but it also plays an important role in the life of nations' (*UHN*, p.258). Adler, however, remains optimistic – 'the mere possession of the new point of view of the absolute equality of every human being, is a step in advance' (*UHN*, p.259).

Holtby, writing in 1935, was less optimistic that this simple recognition of 'the absolute equality of every human being' could win through. Though she never gave up on her ideal of human equality, she had begun to recognise that the cultural and political 'inferiority complexes' contributing to the 1930s climate of national and economic insecurity were difficult to overcome:

The post-war slump, the economic distress, the revolt against reason affecting intellectuals, politicians, sociologists and artists alike, the political philosophies of Fascism and nationalism, the long bred inferiority complex resulting from all these give impetus to the backward swinging pendulum. It is never easy to be free; it demands effort to be responsible and independent. Equality is not a frivolous assertion. During twenty-five years doors have been opened; it is not yet certain whether the coming generation will choose to enter its hard-won heritage.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Winifred Holtby, 'Twenty-Five Years: The Women's Revolution', *The Schoolmistress*, Feb 14, 1935, WH/2/2.21/04/02b.



Here she outlines how multiple 'inferiority complexes' plague 1930s Europe. Arising from the anti-rationalist movement (discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis) of which nationalism and fascism are just two elements, they are compounded by economic depression and unemployment. Her generation had witnessed the possibilities for equality but in Holtby's view, the 'long bred inferiority complexes' compel women and men alike to turn away from equality and seek refuge in national chauvinism and the big population theory of fascism.

Holtby was not the only woman writer of her era to begin to adopt an Adlerian perspective on the political consequences of the 'inferiority complex'. Phyllis Bottome, a major biographer of Adler mentioned above, had much in common with Holtby's intellectual and feminist position. Like Holtby, she also contributed regularly to the liberal feminist journal *Time and Tide* and, during the 1930s, adapted Adler's approach to a feminist and anti-fascist critique.<sup>52</sup> Her reception of Adler was evident not only in the 1939 biography, *Alfred Adler, Apostle of Freedom* but also in her novels. In her analysis of Bottome's fiction during the late 1930s, Phyllis Lassner remarks that 'Her psychological analysis of political events was the outgrowth of applying the principles of Alfred Adler's moral psychology to individual and political behaviour' (Lassner, p.219-20). Like Holtby, it would seem, Bottome began by applying Adler's concept of the 'inferiority complex' to a feminist critique of women's inferior position in a male-dominated society and then progressed onto integrating this into a critique of fascism. For example, Bottome's 1937 novel, *The Mortal Storm*, developed her conviction that Adlerian psychology could heal the economic and political disparities of Europe that spawned fascism. This successful novel depicted the rise of Nazism from the perspective of a German Jewish family,

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<sup>52</sup> Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlefields of Their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p.26.



whose daughter conducts a forbidden romance and whose sons join the Blackshirts. (Lassner, p.219).

In Parts 2 and 3 of this chapter, I argue that we can see this psychological analysis developing in Holtby's 1934 novel, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* and her play *Take Back Your Freedom*, published and first performed in 1939. Like Bottome's *Mortal Storm* (1937) and also Katherine Burdekin's 1938 novel, *Swastika Night*, Holtby draws connections between the ideology of biological determinism implicit in the fascist war machine and the threat to women's emancipation. She, however, illumines these disturbing connections early on in the 1930s, before either Bottome or Burdekin, at the inception of the British fascist movement and Hitler's rise to power. By comparison, Holtby's psychological critique of nationalism and fascism appears much more embryonic but her feminist and anti-fascist approach via Adler's 'inferiority complex' is nevertheless remarkable in its political acumen and far-sightedness.



## Part 2

### 'Maternal Instinct' and Nationalism in *Mandoa, Mandoa!*

In a short story entitled, 'The Maternal Instinct', published in 1933, Holtby offers an acerbic comment on the political myopia of maternal devotion. A spinster confronts her friend, a new mother, on the subject of her husband's income. By creating anxiety over national security in the third world South American nations of Bolivia and Paraguay, he has profited from selling them planes with which to bomb each other. 'How can you bear it for your lovely Robin to be nursed on blood?', she challenges her friend.<sup>53</sup> Cynthia, however, is not to be jolted from her maternal microcosm and tacitly dismisses Fanny's assertions by classing her as one of those 'frustrated spinsters really . . . not fit for civilised society' (*ibid*). The short episode closes with Cynthia taking the baby Robin from the spinster Fanny's arms, symbolising her dismissal of Fanny's challenge because she is not a mother. The final scene is an ironic tableau of Cynthia with her infant: 'a serene and noble figure of maternal dignity' (*ibid*).

'The Maternal Instinct' encapsulates Holtby's growing concern around the trend to prioritise the child at the centre of the interwar home and family. It also illustrates her increasing belief that spinsters had something to say to mothers that might avert the potential political ramifications of the 'maternal instinct'. Moreover, this short story serves to highlight the potential ideological violence that sustains the mother-son relationship. As Fanny points out little Robin is 'nursed on blood' and fattened on the fruits of imperialist exploitation. 'The Maternal Instinct' epitomised by Cynthia extends only to her own child and blinds her to the needs of other people's children. It

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<sup>53</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Maternal Instinct', *Remember, Remember!: The Selected Stories of Winifred Holtby*, ed. Berry and Shaw (London: Virago, 1999; first pub. 1927, 1934, 1937), pp. 63-66 (p.66).



seems that Holtby is making moral and ethical judgments on the mother figure here. The spinster's political awareness is contrasted with the mother's wilful denial of the bloodshed beyond the home on which her son is nurtured.

Holtby develops these observations on the 'maternal instinct' and its complicity with ideological violence and nationalism in her fifth novel, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1934). This novel unfolds Holtby's thoughts on the developing trends in maternity and child-rearing and their potential to generate 'inferiority complexes' in mothers and sons. Here, the ethical and moral judgments made against the mother, Cynthia, in 'The Maternal Instinct' are complicated by Holtby's exploration of maternal 'inferiority complexes' produced by 'The Cult of the Cradle'. In *Mandoa, Mandoa!* the mother's 'inferiority complex' impacts heavily on the development of her two sons and the novel's satirical comment on British imperialism tracks the political consequences of their personal complexes for a fictional West African state, Mandoa.

### **Inheriting the 'Inferiority Complex'**

The mother figure of *Mandoa, Mandoa!* is Mrs. Durrant, a widow who has sacrificed everything to raise her two sons, Maurice and Bill. The youngest, Maurice, is the one she has sacrificed most for and the strain of this sacrifice is narrated in flashback:

Mrs. Durrant, left with a small but adequate income, conscientious and grief-stricken, decided to devote herself entirely to her young children. She moved to Wimbledon, took a small house with a garden, dismissed the nurse, sent Bill, then nearly six to a kindergarten, and announced her intention of looking after Maurice herself.

Her relatives praised her sensible decision. What could be more consoling to a widow than the constant companionship of her little sons? Unhappily for Maurice, Mrs.



Durrant, like many other women, was bored by babies. She did not acknowledge this. Indeed, the suggestion would have horrified her. But the fact remained that the more time she spent with Maurice, the less she really liked him.

. . . She grew weekly more depressed and irritable, but, being completely convinced by current theories of the maternal instinct, attributed her depression to her bereavement, and accepted it as inevitable.<sup>54</sup>

Mrs. Durrant's attitude seems to fit what Adler would define as an 'inferiority complex'. She refuses to acknowledge that she does not want to live up to the social expectations of maternity. Instead, she feels cowed by the expectations of approving relatives and theories of 'maternal instinct'. She cannot overcome her feelings of inferiority generated by not living up to those expectations of femininity, nor express her rebellion against them in a constructive way. They therefore develop into an 'inferiority complex' which seems to manifest itself in her loathing for her youngest son. He embodies all the unwilling compromises she has made in order to conform to social expectations of femininity and maternal duty. As we learn, Mrs. Durrant had been 'a popular hostess, an impassioned novel-reader, a player of bridge and tennis, an ardent member of the Ladies' Unionist Association' but her 'agreeable occupations' of socialising outside the home are substituted for 'a martyr's querulous devotion [to] her self-appointed task' (*MM*, p.42-3).

Mrs. Durrant therefore strives to live up to her maternal duty but this damages rather than benefits her family. Bill, the son whom she sent away to kindergarten, becomes associated in her mind with his father and her previous socially vibrant life. To her, Bill 'possessed some quality of manhood', which, in contrast to her own secluded domestic life, reveals 'contact with an exciting and unfamiliar world' (*MM*,

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<sup>54</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Mandoa, Mandoa!: A Comedy of Irrelevance* (London: Collins, 1933; repr. 1935), pp.42-43. Further page references are hereafter denoted in the main text *MM*.



p.43). She therefore favours him over Maurice with whom she associates her sense of maternal failure and mundane domestic chores. She creates disparity between the brothers which Maurice senses acutely: 'Maurice, watching the weary, reproving face he knew to be his mother's, transformed by the radiant and adoring love for Bill, learned too soon the peculiar torments of jealousy' (*MM*, p.43). Jealousy, as Adler notes in *Understanding Human Nature*, is pre-eminent amongst siblings: '[e]xaggerated competition between brothers and sisters is one of the most frequent family causes of jealousy' (*UHN*, p.222), as jealousy 'arises from the feeling of being neglected and the sense of being discriminated against' (*UHN*, p.221). Maurice's feelings towards Bill can certainly be described this way: 'Maurice knew that he had the greater share of her [his mother's] time, her devotion, her thought, and her caresses; but he never doubted for a moment that it was Bill who had her heart' (*MM*, p.44). Maurice's jealousy of Bill becomes a decisive and enduring factor in the formation of his personality and underpins all of his ambitions for success and influence. The development of his character through the course of the novel plays out Adler's summation of jealousy as 'an especially well-marked form of striving for power' (*UHN*, p.223).

The two brothers in *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, Maurice and Bill, closely resemble the two characters of Holtby's spoof psychological case-study, 'The Queen's Justice', a short story written for *Time and Tide* in 1932. Set in Fairyland, this comic tale narrates the fortunes of two godchildren on whom the fairies in true fairytale fashion bestow life-long gifts at birth. One is blessed with all the charm, good-looks, good-health, intelligence and capability to be successful. In addition, the fairy queen gives this child 'a tender heart', later defined as 'the Superiority Complex'. The other godchild is afflicted with a set of maladjusted attributes: average looks, neither



distinguished nor charming, ill-health, misunderstood genius, a lack of self-confidence and a minimal amount of talent. His extra gift is 'a grievance' or 'inferiority complex'. Both complexes are depicted ambiguously. Neither makes either godchild happy. The 'Superiority Complex' urges the tender-hearted godchild to try to help those less fortunate but he is always stricken with the need to give more. The 'inferiority complex' spurs the second godchild on to achieve more and more but he is never satisfied. He represents the social and political underdog who feels that he or she must strive in vain to compensate for their shortcomings. The tale ends with the fairy queen's moral of the tale:

For a grievance, which some call an Inferiority Complex, is the most powerful weapon of attack in Fairyland . . . For a tender heart, which some call a Superiority Complex is the most powerful weapon of defence in Fairyland'.<sup>55</sup>

We might deduce that Holtby does not apply Adler's terms correctly here. The 'Superiority Complex' in Holtby's story is depicted as the exact opposite of the 'inferiority complex' rather than simply another compensatory manifestation of it. Yet, Holtby importantly hits upon the self-seeking impulse of the 'inferiority complex' and its potentially destructive results for others. The godchild with a grievance or 'inferiority complex' succeeds despite his lack of talent and charm, because '[a]rmed with a grievance the second man was able to rob his friend of health, wealth and fortune' ('The Queen's Justice, p.127). His 'inferiority complex' drives him on to achieve success at any cost without regard for his fellow-men and yet

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<sup>55</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Queen's Justice' in *Remember, Remember!: The Selected Stories of Winifred Holtby* ed. Paul Berry and Marion Shaw (London: Virago, 1999), pp.121-127 (p.127).



he still remains unsatisfied. In *Mandoa, Mandoa!* Maurice's 'inferiority complex' follows the same path of egotism and destruction.

Mrs. Durrant's 'inferiority complex' over her maternal duty and the resultant jealousy engendered in her youngest son Maurice serve to polarise the two brothers along the same lines as the two godchildren in 'The Queen's Justice'. Maurice's attitude to Bill closely resembles that of the second godchild in the 'Queen's Justice', afflicted with a 'life-long grievance': 'Maurice', we learn 'had started life at a disadvantage' (*MM*, p.42) and grows into a sickly and pessimistic individual, 'delicate and rather difficult', forever stricken down with childhood diseases (*MM*, p.42). Even after his first appearance in the novel as the successful Conservative MP, illness strikes and the '[n]ext day he was in bed with laryngitis and a temperature' (*MM*, p.49), an attention-seeking reaction to the fact that his hard-won success is continually overshadowed by his mother's solicitude over Bill's welfare. Contrastingly, like the godchild with the 'tender heart' in 'The Queen's Justice', Bill wins people's affections easily, shines academically, has a healthy constitution and makes the best of everything. Such disparities create complexes in the godchildren of 'The Queen's Justice' and the same is true in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* Maurice's jealousy of Bill endows him with a perpetual 'grievance' which, as Holtby defines in her short story, is an 'inferiority complex'. Maurice is forever upstaged by his brother and confronted by 'a mirage of infantile apprehensions' (*MM*, p.291). Bill's self-assured laugh resonates with 'the whole secret of his superiority too deep for doubt' (*MM*, p.291). Like the godchild with a 'grievance', Maurice it seems can never win and will never be his brother's equal, neither in his mother's eyes, nor his own.

Maurice's 'inferiority complex' is, however, exacerbated by the First World War. It is hinted that 'Mrs. Durrant might have gained equal pleasure from both her



sons' since at school 'Maurice was winning by dogged industry the prizes that Bill had lost through careless brilliance' (*MM*, p.44). Yet, Bill's role in the war forever puts Maurice in the shadows. Old enough to fight in the First World War, when the dejected Maurice was not, Bill serves as a fighter pilot. Even after he crashes his plane ignominiously in England, his mother adores him all the more in defeat. His war-trauma turns him into something of a renegade, prodigal son and as such he eternally elicits his mother's devoted concern. Maurice's political and commercial successes pale into insignificance by comparison. By accentuating Maurice's individual 'inferiority complex', initiated by his mother's favouritism, with the added sense of inferiority attached to non-combatants, Holtby subtly points to how 'Inferiority Complexes' were widespread amongst men as well as women of the interwar generation. The specific effects of the 'inferiority complex' as a male non-combatant are explored more fully in Part 3 of this chapter, in relation to Holtby's anti-dictatorship play, *Take Back Your Freedom*.

In *Mandoa, Mandoa!* we start to see how Mrs. Durrant's and Maurice's 'Inferiority Complexes' are symptomatic of collective cultural 'Inferiority Complexes', specific to the interwar historical and political context. The novel highlights this through its comment on nationalism and imperialism.

### **Nationalist and Imperialist 'Inferiority Complexes'**

The main plot of *Mandoa, Mandoa!* is centred on a British travel company's enterprise in the eponymous fictional West African country, near to Abyssinia. Joseph Prince, the elderly business entrepreneur and owner of 'Prince's Tours' travel company, is keen to build a new holiday resort in Mandoa in the style of Monte Carlo. His vision is to transform the undeveloped country into a playground for the rich and



adventurous. The two Durrant brothers are integral to this commercial project, each for their different reasons and with different outcomes for development of their characters.

Maurice has an esteemed career with 'Princes Tours, Limited'. His 'inferiority complex' over Bill spurs him on to great and rapid promotional achievements both in business and politics. 'The pain of his frustrated childhood had taught him both sensitiveness and tenacity' so that by 'thirty-one' Maurice is 'a member of parliament and a successful man' and very importantly, with Bill temporarily out of the picture, 'the advisor, protector and comforter of his mother' (*MM*, p.46). Maurice's personal, commercial and political ambitions are forever intertwined. He uses his status in the company to get his down-and-out brother, Bill, a job as Prince's agent over in Mandoa and thereby placate his mother. Similarly, he uses his new-found political connections as a Conservative MP to ensure that Joseph Prince's scheme in Mandoa is sanctioned by the government.

Maurice's personal success assuages his 'inferiority complex' but is predicated on his appeal to other people's 'Inferiority Complexes'. For example, to ensure governmental approval of Prince's scheme in Mandoa, he plays to prevailing notions of economic, national and imperial insecurities. The romantic yet myopic tycoon, Joseph Prince, naively believes that 'in Mandoa, the British sought enterprise, not ownership, influence or government' (*MM*, p.199). Maurice, however, has secured government backing for the project despite the unpalatable knowledge of Mandoa's slave trade, precisely by stressing Britain's potential political and economic gains. He promotes the project, promising that 'Prince's Tours' will build an airport in Mandoa enabling commercial passage to the Sudan by air and allowing the British to 'establish a sphere of influence', through which Mandoa might become 'a new centre for



investment and our export trade' (*MM*, p.104). Not only does Mandoa promise to boost Britain's export trade but it also offers a neat solution to the economic slump at home and its associated high unemployment levels.

Maurice's personal 'inferiority complex' therefore becomes tied in with a national 'inferiority complex' born of the economic depression and decline of imperialism. In overcoming his own 'inferiority complex', he therefore strives to revitalise nationalist and imperialist feeling. As we learn early on, 'Maurice at twenty-four was already an imperialist' and succeeds so convincingly because '[h]e saw in Prince's a training ground for the Cecil Rhodes and Clives and Raleighs of the future' (*MM*, p.53). When he becomes a Conservative MP, Maurice promises national security and renewal in the face of Bolshevik internationalism and class war. Standing for 'freedom, unity and Empire', he asserts that those of the electorate who vote Conservative have 'dared to be realists, to be patriots, to be British' and that with their help, the Conservatives will rectify the doubt that has rendered 'our nation, since the war . . . unable to assert her former faith or to stride forward to her great imperial destiny' (*MM*, p.29). Maurice's 'inferiority complex' therefore becomes a driving force for fusing personal, capitalist, nationalist and imperialist ambitions.

In contrast to Maurice's strident declaration of nationalist and capitalist ambitions, Bill articulates the broad spectrum of tangled moral, political and economic questions. Secure in the knowledge that his mother loves and adores him, Bill suffers none of Maurice's anguished inferiority and this self-confidence enables him to cast a dispassionate eye over the whole social and political panorama. Maurice labours for his mother's affection and superiority over Bill but Bill labours for nobody in particular and as such sees the big picture, unlike Maurice. As Bill tells Prince's agent Blacker, sent to cover up the Mandoan scandal, 'I've got enough imagination to



see the "all togetherness of everything" and 'the money, both private and governmental, which Prince's is getting is blood money made on the sale of slaves' (*MM*, pp.222-23). Yet, this 'blood money' pays the wages of the British working classes, who would otherwise be unemployed. As the company's agent in Mandoa, Bill highlights how he has facilitated Britain's exploitation of Mandoa for economic benefit: 'Rails from Sheffield; engines from Doncaster; gramophones, work-baskets, sewing machines – good British labour – haven't I sold them all?' (*MM*, p.220). Equally, he recognises that without the success of the Mandoan development then '[I]n Sheffield, Manchester, Guildford, Leeds, the men making this stuff . . . would be unemployed again' (*MM*, p.222).

Bill's knowledge of the unemployment problem is revealed from the outset, when he is introduced as a socialist, standing in line at the labour exchange: a total contrast to his capitalist and Conservative brother. Bill's socialism is, however, lampooned by a number of characters as patronising and false. One working-class man teasingly denounces him as 'the squire, condescending kindly to the bright working man' (*MM*, p.67). Similarly, Jean Stanbury, a professional single woman employed by Holtby's fictional equivalent of the League of Nations, 'The International Humanitarian League', criticises Bill's hypocritical socialism as 'feudal' benevolence rather than comradeship: 'You're far more at home among Pukka Sahibs and whatnot. You ought to go overseas, to India or somewhere, where you can live like a white man, maintaining a benevolent feudal interest in the natives' (*MM*, p.73). Certainly, Bill embarks on his Mandoan expedition with this sense of social superiority but the reality that he is only legally permitted in Mandoa as Talal's slave challenges this, as does his encounter with the Mandoan Princess. Confronted with her inchoate appeals for his help to bring her prohibited love for the archbishop to



fruition, Bill is profoundly struck by her plaintive urgency. It disturbs 'the soothing unreality of his first vision of Mandoa' (*MM*, p.165) and compels him to recognise:

For the first time that he was not a tragic adult personality working out his fate against a fantastic back-ground of comedians but that he and the Mandoans were human beings together, trapped in an inescapable relationship of destiny. (*MM*, p.164)

Though Bill might seem to start out with an arrogant air of patronage, his feelings of superiority develop into a strong affirmation of broad-minded sympathy and human equality. In a novel that culminates with the dissolution of the British influence in Mandoa and a bloody military coup by Mandoan reactionaries, Bill embodies the only sustained hope for international understanding and universal equality.

In contrast, Maurice never succeeds in recognising the Mandoans as equal human beings. Significant to the underlying call for racial equality in *Mandoa*, *Mandoa!*, is the one occasion when Maurice strives to act heroically and selflessly, which ironically becomes a demonstration of racial superiority. After some reformers from the 'International Humanitarian Association' are taken hostage by Mandoan reactionaries, hostile to the Western developments in their country, Maurice pledges to lead an intrepid rescue mission. Amongst the hostages is the novel's single female protagonist, Jean Stanbury, whom Maurice determines to save in order to gain superiority over Bill – '[t]his game was between him and his brother' – and braving danger, he strives to cancel out Bill's superiority won through war experience (*MM*, p.307). With this new ascendancy to confidence and power, Maurice feels '[f]ree from old fears, old inhibitions and old inferiorities' (*MM*, p.309). Driven on by his 'inferiority complex' to embark on the hazardous rescue attempt, he secures success by bartering for the reformers' lives with the life of a Mandoan noble. To Maurice 'it's



only a native' but to Talal, the Lord High Chamberlain of Mandoa, Maurice is one of 'the white men who had rescued their kind, leaving his blood-brother in the enemy's hands' (*MM*, p.330). Frequently throughout the novel, Holtby deploys the Mandoan perspective to critique British attitudes. Elsewhere, Talal points disturbingly to British hypocrisy; the British objection to slavery is perplexing to him in the light of unemployment, labour exchange queues and the capitalist exploitation of the working classes; and the British proclivity to 'keep prostitutes and give frozen mitt<sup>\*</sup> to woman-traffic' equally confuses him (*MM*, p.138). In this instance, Talal's criticism sets up a chain of disturbing connections. A Mandoan noble and slave owner, Talal understands racial hierarchies all too well but his perspective reveals the self-interest in Maurice's apparently selfless, heroic act. It points to how Maurice's personal 'inferiority complex' has wider political ramifications of nationalist and ultimately racial superiority.

Viewed through the Adlerian concept of the 'inferiority complex' the relationship between Maurice, Bill and their mother therefore becomes a politicised struggle of personal, national and international proportions. With his alternate socialist and feudal associations, Bill develops from well-meaning insensitivity to an internationalist's understanding of human interdependency across class, gender and race. In contrast, Maurice's 'inferiority complex' steers him towards public success, capitalising on exploitation whilst remaining safely immured behind national interests. Through Maurice Durrant, Holtby explores the broader social and political impact of a personal 'inferiority complex' on attitudes to imperialism and racial inequality. Yet the novel also succeeds in coming full circle to show that Maurice's 'inferiority complex' also perpetuates the social climate that produced his mother's 'inferiority complex' and consequentially his own.

\* In the Americanised pidgin English of Holtby's Mandoans, the phrase 'give frozen mitt' means to forbid or prohibit.



### The Second Mrs. Durrant

The novel ends unexpectedly and anti-climatically. The Mandoan development is completely abandoned by Prince's Tours after the Mandoan royal wedding and its accompanying conflagrations, started in protest by the Mandoan Conservatives. Talal is superseded in power by 'the High Council of the Conservative leader, Safi Ma'buta' (*MM*, p.361) who destroys the new development and plunges Mandoa back into chaos and dilapidation. In Britain, the last vestiges of socialist idealism remain at a safe distance abroad with Bill. Maurice wins out, not only politically but also romantically. Though the romantic subplot of the novel is centred on Bill and Jean, it is Maurice who finally and unexpectedly marries her. By the end of the novel, Maurice is no longer an inferiority-ridden bachelor but a successful husband and junior statesman.

In the light of Holtby's appropriation of the romance genre, discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, we might imagine the 'feminine middlebrow' reader to have been both disappointed and puzzled by Jean's sudden marriage to Maurice rather than Bill at the close of *Mandoa, Mandoa!* Their marriage is not only abrupt but also related impersonally through newspaper reportage. Moreover, Jean's attraction to Maurice is surprisingly explained by his 'inferiority complex': '[s]he loved him with a passion of tenderness for the lonely little boy he had been [. . .] she loved him for the raw need he had brought to her, the raw, naked, human, hungry need which was their buried secret' (*MM*, p.372). Attracted by his neediness, Jean salves it and in doing so allows Maurice to overcome his 'inferiority complex' because '[b]y marrying Maurice, by so promptly fulfilling Maurice's desire for fatherhood, she had set things right between him and Bill for ever' (*MM*, p.372). Not only does Jean allow Maurice to feel victory over Bill but she also becomes a mother substitute, another Mrs.



Durrant. Parallels between Jean and the former Mrs. Durrant are strongly insinuated: like Maurice's mother, Jean has sacrificed her career for husband and children, significantly 'fulfilling Maurice's desire for fatherhood', not her own desire for motherhood. The novel closes with her hosting a dinner party for a former MP and his wife, along with some of the reformers with whom she travelled to Mandoa and was taken hostage. The closing tableau leaves us with the image of her not as the figure of professional independence as we might expect but rather as the angel in the home at the heart of nationalist, conservative politics.

For the feminist or economically independent female reader, Jean's choice to become the little mother sitting mutely at the dinner table and accepting Maurice's dismissive attitude to her views, is frustrating. Yet, Holtby seems to have been aware of these effects on her reader. The short story, 'An Episode in West Kensington', represents a scene between Jean and her old spinster colleague, Evelyn. Although originally intended for inclusion in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* it was rejected and Holtby published it separately. In many ways, it develops Jean's conflicting thoughts on her transformation from single professional woman to mother and reveals her inner anguish. The parallels with Maurice's mother's depression are cemented. Under Evelyn's accusatory onslaught, Jean starts to confess that she's not sure of her love for Maurice and laments: 'I have to face years of small domestic responsibilities which I loathe' and 'for the first time since I left Highgate I'm dependent. And I don't like it'.<sup>56</sup> Jean's discomfort with the 'Model Mother' paradigm signals a critique of the civilisation that Maurice has helped to forge with his nationalist politics. Despite nursing his 'inferiority complex' and insecurities, Jean still recognises that Maurice clings to a world of national security that is fragile and doomed to disaster. 'Perhaps

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<sup>56</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Episode at West Kensington' in *Remember, Remember!: The Selected Stories of Winifred Holtby* ed. Paul Berry and Marion Shaw (London: Virago, 1999), pp.91-111 (p.100).



even now', she reflects 'events were rushing forward to the disaster which would wreck all dreams' (Episode, p.111).

This 'disaster' is speculated on in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* The motherly reformer, Frau Von Scheldon, questions whether European civilisation can offer anything to Mandoa when it too 'totters': '[i]n Germany, revolution perhaps; war perhaps in six months' (MM, p.373). The vapid MP's wife, Selena Lufton, frivolously discards suggestions of 'revolution' in England but Jean's thoughts rebel against such political myopia. As in the short story, 'Episode at West Kensington', Jean is all too aware by the end of *Mandoa, Mandoa!* that 'civilisation may end tomorrow' (MM, p.374). Her recognition and stoic resolution in the face of impending disaster are tellingly mirrored by Bill at the close of the novel. Conscious that he 'represent[s] a firm that pursued its own profit and a nation that considered its own prestige', Bill faces the foreboding omen that 'the flood of barbarism might pour back across the world' with the simple but hollow consolation that 'he had prepared the way, he knew not for what event' (MM, p.381-2). *Mandoa, Mandoa!* ends on an ominous note. With the reaffirmation of reactionary nationalism in both Britain and Mandoa, 'the clouds' that 'swam together, drowning both light and darkness' auger international strife where black and white moral issues become increasingly confused. The mention of German revolution and war points to the nature of this impending disaster: the rise of fascism and the Second World War.

Set a few months forward in time in 1933, as Holtby wrote it in 1932, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* is a cautionary and prophetic tale for the growth of European fascism. Although without revolution, Hitler, did ascend to power in Germany in 1933, after securing the support of the middle-class electorate. Equally, the various references to Mussolini's interest in the fictional Mandoa were also played out in the



reality of Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. Bill observes that the Mandoans are stridently Catholic and well-versed in ' "God Bless our Pope," the Fascist national anthem' (*MM*, pp.215-6). Maurice's initial attempts to raise the issue of Mandoa in political circles 'never got nearer to Mandoa than a passing reference to Italian ambitions in North Africa' (*MM*, p.82). As with all of Holtby's fictional work in the 1930s, the threat of fascism presses around the margins of the text. *Mandoa, Mandoa!* proves ominously prophetic and when, in the year of Holtby's death, Mussolini invaded Abyssinia, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* caught its second wind of popularity. As one reviewer notes, 'I see that *Mandoa, Mandoa!* which the Abyssinian affair has turned into a 'topical' novel, has just been re-issued by Messrs. Collins in their popular Green Leaf Library'.<sup>57</sup>

*Mandoa, Mandoa!* therefore begins to illustrate a number of elements in Holtby's perceptions of the fascist threat and the psychological attitudes underpinning it. In this novel, Holtby suggests how social attitudes undervalue women's professional and political contributions to society and pressurise them into following the 'maternal instinct'. In her view, this attitude is responsible for generating 'inferiority complexes' amongst women that in turn impact on the psychological outlook of their offspring. Maurice Durrant illustrates how an 'inferiority complex' can spiral out to impact beyond the family sphere on national and international politics. The plight of Jean Durrant at the end of the novel highlights the vicious circle of 'inferiority complexes' between mothers and sons. Ultimately, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* subtly points to the insidious momentum of reactionary nationalism in the 1930s and its destructive telos in the fascist war machine.

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<sup>57</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, R.A. Scott James, *London Mercury*, November 1935, WH/4/4.1/01a.



### Part 3

#### The Fascist Dictator and Rational Motherhood in *Take Back Your Freedom*

*Take Back Your Freedom*, like *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, was both highly prophetic and potentially radical in its satirical gaze. Though Holtby began writing the play in 1934, it was only published after her death in 1939, after the adaptations were made by Norman Ginsbury to render it stage-worthy. By this time, cataclysmic changes had taken place in world politics, producing the Axis powers of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and Japan whose aggressive imperialism threatened world peace. Hitler had invaded Austria and threatened France and Poland. Holtby's play was first staged in the months leading up to Britain's declaration of war on Nazi Germany. Vera Brittain, in an eloquent preface to the play, remarks on its even greater topicality five years on: '[t]he recent ruthless march of world history has made *Take Back Your Freedom* even more topical to-day than it was when Winifred wrote it'.<sup>58</sup> Reviews of the play, if not convinced by either its characterisation or originality in the later 1930s, with Europe on the brink of war, did at least acknowledge that Holtby's play, begun as it was in 1934, shined with prescience. One admits 'it reveals a prophetic quality'<sup>59</sup> whilst another, written for *Time and Tide*, acclaims Holtby as an author 'who always seemed to see further and think faster than the rest of us'.<sup>60</sup>

Holtby's choice to write her anti-fascist message of what would become *Take Back Your Freedom* as a play rather than a novel is striking on two counts. Firstly, the dramatic genre was at that time still very male-dominated and the novel regarded as much the more feminine mode of expression. Secondly, Holtby became increasingly

<sup>58</sup> Winifred Holtby and Norman Ginsbury, *Take Back Your Freedom: A Play in Three Acts*, preface by Vera Brittain; introduction by Tyrone Guthrie (London: Jonathon Cape, 1939), p.9.

<sup>59</sup> I.B., 'Don Into Dictator', *Manchester Guardian*, June 1939, p.8.

<sup>60</sup> Edith Shackleton, 'Newly Published Plays', *Time and Tide*, 8 July 1939, p.916-918 (p.916).



interested in branching out into writing plays in the 1930s, perhaps influenced by her interest in drama and her love of Bernard Shaw. She had already experimented with political satire and dramatic genre in the late 1920s: *Eutychus and the Future of the Pulpit* (1928) was a treatise on the substitution of religious morality for mass media and science, and *A New Voter's Guide to Party Programmes* (1929), was written as an aid to first-time female voters in understanding the political terrain.<sup>61</sup> In both these cases, the dramatic genre is adopted as a platform for dialogue between competing social, scientific, religious and political discourses. George Catlin sheds some further light on Holtby's use of dramatic dialogue after reading her *New Voter's Guide*:

This dialogue style goes fine . . . I envy the way you are able to mop up all views in whole provinces of human knowledge – religion, politics – and re-present them without committing yourself – the tedious boredom of narrative is that one has to take a side.<sup>62</sup>

In *Take Back Your Freedom* Holtby, despite her dramatic dialogue, does in fact clearly 'take a side'. Where a *New Voter's Guide* offers no real political bias, *Take Back Your Freedom* is stridently anti-fascist. Yet, here the dramatic form serves to leave the play open-ended nevertheless. The political satire is anti-fascist but the dramatic dialogue fails to offer any concrete solutions, either to the psychological and political climate that engenders fascism or to combating established fascist dystopias.

Though she adapts the dramatic form to her political message well, Holtby's inexperience at writing drama – relative to her experience as an established novelist – is evident. Certainly some of the criticisms of the play's stagecraft and

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<sup>61</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit* (London: Kegan Paul, 1928). Winifred Holtby, *A New Voter's Guide To Party Programmes: Political Dialogues* (London: Kegan Paul, 1929).

<sup>62</sup> William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, George Catlin Letters to Winifred Holtby, 1 June 1929, Box 158.



characterisation made by contemporary reviewers are justified. In her recent biography of Holtby, Marion Shaw astutely weighs the balance of the play's merits against its weaknesses when she claims,

[t]he play's theatrical crudity – the psychology of its characters is not particularly convincing and its scenes frequently veer towards melodrama – should not disguise the radical nature of its thinking at the time when it was written.<sup>63</sup>

Shaw finds Holtby's analysis of fascist gender ideology radical in the sense that it pre-empted Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) and Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), both of which explore how sex segregation endlessly perpetuates manliness and womanliness to destructive ends.

I agree with Shaw and certain contemporary reviewers of *Take Back Your Freedom* that the play demonstrates a prescient and astute reading of political events. Yet, what makes the play particularly pertinent to this study is its combination of prescience and psychological analysis. Shaw finds the 'psychology of its characters not particularly convincing' and at times the characters do appear almost two-dimensional. Importantly, however, and unlike Shaw, I find that the general psychological trends explored in the play, especially when read in the light of *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, offer radical insight into the political climate of the 1930s. Holtby uses her dictator, Arnold Clayton, and his mother to express a widespread cultural psychology of the 'inferiority complex' and through them she strikingly demonstrates how such cultural psychology underpins the rise of fascism.

The psychological analysis of the fascist dictator in Holtby's play was remarked upon by a number of contemporary reviewers. Many agreed that Holtby's play simply

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<sup>63</sup> Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999), p.160.



reiterated common psychological theories on dictatorships, though some still found her analysis instructive. As Brittain remarks in the play's preface, 'It is generally accepted by psychologists that a pathological quality determines the careers of most dictators . . . "compensating" either for their own disabilities or those of their nation' (*TBYF*, p.7). A review for *The Listener* praised Holtby's uptake of psychology:

Winifred Holtby was well aware of contemporary theories about power. Her hero actually quotes from an article about himself which says, 'the urge to power is a symptom of belated adolescence usually associated with homosexuality and the mother fixation'. Where many dramatists who accepted this assertion would attempt to present it as a discovery of their own, Miss Holtby made it a basic acknowledgement, an assumption that was merely a beginning for her play.<sup>64</sup>

In my view, Brittain and *The Listener* reviewer sum up Holtby's psychological approach well. The 'urge to power'; might be read as another expression of Adler's central premise of the 'striving for power' over others associated with his concept of the 'inferiority complex'. This, as we considered at the start of the chapter, is spawned when an individual senses that they cannot compensate for their ordinary feelings of inferiority in a constructive and socially amenable way. Clayton's inferiority feelings are connected with his immaturity, his masculine identity and his relationship with his mother, all of which appear to him as impossible to solve and thereby become manifest as an 'inferiority complex'. The play dramatises the process by which he compensates for such personal and political feelings of inadequacy or failure by establishing an increasingly violent dictatorship.

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<sup>64</sup> Anon., 'Reviews', *The Listener*, 5 October 1939, p.686.



## The Fascist Progeny of the Rational Mother

The anti-fascist and mother-son preoccupations of *Take Back Your Freedom* chime strongly with questions raised in the thirties about the relation between art and politics in the works of 'the Auden set'. Auden and his colleagues had forged links between the role of art, Socialism and anti-fascism. Their poetic and dramatic style, terse and hard-hitting, was remarked upon by Holtby: '[t]hey do not court popularity. Their sentiment is as harsh as their texture. They make no concessions to spare the feelings of us, their often bewildered and weary elders'.<sup>65</sup> Holtby's open-mindedness, despite the generation gap, prevented her from denouncing the Audenesque style in the same way that some other writers did. George Orwell, for instance, blamed them for crushing the imaginative freedom of art with politics and declared that 'the literary history of the thirties seems to justify the opinion that a writer does well to keep out of politics'.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, the political drive of Auden, Spender and Isherwood's plays is precisely what *Take Back Your Freedom* shares with them. Spender's *Trial of a Judge*, for example, depicted the trial of three Blackshirts accused of killing a Communist Jew and dramatised the tragic impotence of liberal democracy.<sup>67</sup> *Take Back Your Freedom* pursues the same disastrous fall of democracy. Equally, the anti-fascist plays of the Auden set also often adopted a psychological approach to politics and explored the damaging effects of mother-son relationships; themes also central to Holtby's play. Yet *Take Back Your Freedom*'s feminism sets it apart from the Auden set's notoriously misogynist plays where women, especially mother figures, are

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<sup>65</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Newspaper Clippings, Winifred Holtby, 'The Voice of Youth', *The Schoolmistress*, May 16 1935, WH/2/2.21/04/051.

<sup>66</sup> George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', *George Orwell Essays* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.124.

<sup>67</sup> Stephen Spender, *The Trial of a Judge: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (New York: Random House, 1938).



inextricably connected with the betrayal of young men to the seductions of fascism.<sup>68</sup> More than simply reiterating this apparent collusion between maternity and fascism, Holtby's *Take Back Your Freedom*, as with *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, contemplates the more challenging question of why women have become the perceived enemy, looking at the psychological causes of women's apparent complicity with fascist ideology. As we considered in Part 2, Holtby identifies a vicious circle of 'inferiority complexes' between mother and son, which she develops in *Take Back Your Freedom*, following them to their most nightmarish results of fascist revolution and war. In contrast to the Socialist, androcentric vision of the Auden set, Holtby's is borne of her commitments to rational liberalism and equality feminism.

The relationship between Holtby's anti-hero, Arnold Clayton, and his mother in *Take Back Your Freedom* returns again to the theme of the claustrophobic relationship between mother and son, which we saw in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* Like Maurice Durrant, Clayton's sense of insurmountable inferiority and insecurity, his 'inferiority complex', is connected with his mother. Mrs. Clayton and Mrs. Durrant are alike in the sacrifices they have made for their sons, as Mrs. Clayton makes clear to Arnold:

But when your father was killed and I'd given up my work and had only you to look after, I put into looking after you all my ambition, all my energy, all my hunger for achievement. Don't you see – you're not just yourself? You're me too – all I might have been. (*TBYF*, p.59)

Mrs. Clayton expresses not only the cultural imperative to prioritise mothering over career in the interwar period but also the complete lack of institutional support for single working mothers. Clayton's pressures are therefore different from Maurice's; he does

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<sup>68</sup> For a fascinating discussion of this see Janet Montefiore *Men And Women Writers Of The 1930s: The Dangerous Flood Of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.81-101.



not have to strive to win his mother's affections but to live out her sacrificed ambitions. She has priority in his life and the two are inseparable. Her influence and ambitions account for his academic and political success. As she reveals to him, 'I sacrificed myself for you. My career, my hopes were yours. Your accomplishments were my handiwork. We were indivisible' (*TBYF*, p.112). Unlike the hypochondriacal Maurice, however, Arnold's rebellion against his mother is embittered and vitriolic. He resents the sacrifices she has made for him, accusing of her of vengefully sacrificing his personality to appease her frustrated hopes. He blames her for the psychological motivation behind his fascist dictatorship:

[I]t takes me beyond your reach, so far beyond you'll never be able to enmesh me in your maternal spider's web. It is my refuge, my armour, my weapon to destroy you! You talked about your sacrifices. I was your only offering – my helpless unformed personality which you sacrificed – so altruistically – to your own masterful ego! [. . .] In the very first years of my life you destroyed all the eager initiative that should have fathered the man I was to be [. . .] You incarcerated my struggling individuality and presented me with yours [. . .] You saw me, cultured, didactic, scintillating with scholarship and convictions that were yours and you were proud. (*TBYF*, p.113)

The whole of his 'Plan' for a self-reliant nation without international entanglements, unemployment, foreigners, Jews and women workers is a striving for power to compensate for his sense of compromised masculinity under his mother's influence. Instead of allowing his own 'initiative' to 'have fathered the man', he feels her mothering has been like 'the maternal spider's web' stifling his masculine identity.

*Take Back Your Freedom*, however, adds a new dimension to the destructive mother-son relationship. Unlike Mrs. Durrant, Mrs. Clayton is not simply a woman deprived of social interests outside the home but a woman stripped of her intellectual,



philosophical and political ambitions. She is much more than simply a manipulative mother figure and acts as the voice of reason throughout the play to counter Clayton's escalating dependence on 'corporate emotion' (*TBYF*, p.124). She admits, 'I tried to teach him rational responsibility. I suppose it's natural to resent that' but never desists from challenging Clayton with her commitments to reason and democracy (*TBYF*, p.42). Clayton asserts, 'We must have emotion. Reason divides men into a thousand parties, but passion unites them' (*TBYF*, p.58). His mother, however, sees that such 'emotion' and 'passion' leads to the persecution of foreigners, pacifists and Jews, to 'Concentration camps, medieval tortures and murders' (*TBYF*, p.114). She pleads with him to return Britain to democracy - 'You are being carried beyond yourself, beyond Reason . . .' – but he ruthlessly defies her, associating 'Reason' with her imperious influence over him and dismissing it as '*your* reason' (*TBYF*, p.114).

Significantly for the political problematic of Holtby's play, Mrs. Clayton's appeals to 'Reason' always prove ineffectual but her psychological analysis of her son's rise to power contrastingly seems to strike home. Whereas in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* the psychological insight into Maurice's character is hinted at by the omniscient narrator, the dramatic form necessitated Holtby to place such psychological explications into the mouths of her characters. That she should choose to articulate these through the rational Mrs. Clayton is no accident. As we saw at the very start of this chapter, mothers were becoming increasingly absorbed in literature on child psychology filtered down through women's magazines. In the figure of Mrs. Clayton, Holtby presents the hope that mothers might use this psychology to combat rather than nurture the 'Hitler in the Cradle'. Mrs. Clayton's psychological explanations for her son's totalitarianism are crucial to the play's anti-fascist message. The manner in



which she describes Arnold's psychology is suffused with the Adlerian concept of the 'inferiority complex':

You've created your Movement out of your doubts and your frustrations, your inner misgivings about your efficacy, your beliefs about your own futility. You have manufactured a monster out of beliefs that are nothing but distortions, out of doubts and fears that your masculine pride should have strangled as long ago as your adolescence [. . .] A stupendous devilish effort to calm your inner fears! [. . .] to prove to yourself that you, more than all the creatures of the earth, are a potent being! (*TBYF*, pp.114-5)

Clayton's fascist dictatorship is therefore cast as the symptom of his unconquerable fears of inefficacy, of an inability to overcome childish 'doubts'. The language here resonates with Adler's theory of inferiority feelings and striving for power which, by virtue of their persistence into adulthood, have manifested themselves pathologically as an 'inferiority complex'.

Moreover, Mrs. Clayton also recognises that she is responsible for her son's 'inferiority complex', confessing to him, 'it's partly my fault. It's my responsibility. I brought you up' (*TBYF*, p.109). At this point she remedies this by setting up a 'Child Guidance' committee (*TBYF*, p.111) but the audience are left with the impression that the power now exerted by her son over the whole nation started with her. Though she proclaims to have sacrificed herself to her son, there is also the suggestion that she too felt resentful and inadequate about relinquishing her intellectual ambitions. We are reminded of Adler's theory that society undervalues women socially, economically and politically. Mrs Clayton appears as a prime case of the 'masculine protest' or 'inferiority complex', determined to compensate for her own sense of gender inferiority through her son. Arnold Clayton accuses her of abusing her power as a



mother. He berates her for her 'masterful ego' and laments, 'I could only see through your imperious eyes, the eyes of a woman whose academic doctrines blinded her to the needs for other contacts' (*TBYF*, p.113).

*Take Back Your Freedom* develops the tragic and brutal ramifications of the vicious circle of 'inferiority complexes' between mothers and sons first broached in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* The Adlerian perspective yields perceptive and disturbing insights into the origins of the fascist striving for power. One review for the *Sunday Times*, however, took issue with Holtby's implication of mother-son relationships in the rise of fascism. This male reviewer found the whole premise preposterous, exclaiming 'Surely this is feminism run mad. A dictator who should upset the world merely to get away from his mother's apron-strings [. . .] I just don't believe that the hand that rules the cradle rocks the world'.<sup>69</sup> This refutation of Holtby's 'feminism run mad' denies the interdependency between the domestic and political spheres so central to Holtby's analysis. Moreover, it reads Holtby's play as reinforcing the anti-feminist belief that women's growing influence over the interwar years in all areas of politics and society was responsible for creating the climate in which fascism thrived. Holtby is of course suggesting the opposite of this, namely that thwarted female ambition under growing 1930s conservatism and anti-feminism further catalyses the emergence of fascism. Yet, in concentrating purely on Holtby's perceived wayward feminism, this reviewer also fails to recognise that *Take Back Your Freedom* has as much to say about modes of masculinity as about women's power or lack of power.

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<sup>69</sup> James Agate, 'Rocking and Ruling', *The Sunday Times*, 25 August 1940, p.6.



### Anxious Virility and the Man of Action

Arnold Clayton can be read as a re-working of Maurice Durrant; he is torn between his academic personality and the pressing need to be a man of action, to compensate, like Maurice, for his debilitating sense of immunity from the war experience. Like Maurice, his father also died when he was a child and his best friend, Dick Lawrence, fought in the war whilst he remained at home working in politics. The opposition between Clayton and Lawrence is much more pronounced than between the Durrant brothers. Lawrence is a military man of action, whereas Clayton is an intellectual. Clayton's mother outlines how deeply Clayton is affected by his exemption from fighting in the war and how much he has always wanted to be more like Lawrence:

Then when the War came and Dick went to France and they kept Arnold in Whitehall, it was worse than ever. Ever since then Arnold's been trying to force himself into the position of a man of action just to show he's not afraid. (*TBYF*, p.42)

Compared to Maurice Durrant in *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, we might understand Clayton's conflict between 'reason' and 'action' as symptomatic of his 'inferiority complex' as a non-combatant in the First World War. Like Maurice, Clayton is not just a psychological anomaly but emblematic of the psychological insecurity felt by many young men of Holtby and Brittain's post-war generation. Both he and Maurice reveal the pervasive sense of inescapable personal and cultural inferiority against which only fascism might offer new hopes of national solidarity and self-validation.

Though Clayton clearly shares Maurice Durrant's 'inferiority complex' as a non-combatant, he also embodies a number of other masculine anxieties identified by Holtby as endemic to interwar culture. One is the need for leadership, most often



associated by Holtby with D. H. Lawrence and with fascist leaders like Mussolini and Oswald Mosley. The other, also associated with Lawrence and Mosley, is the need for sexual division to ensure an uncompromised masculine identity and a privileged masculinist culture. Finally, Holtby stages the liberal disillusionment with reason and democracy as a gender inflected discourse pre-eminent in Mosley's party rhetoric and also as a site of conflict for intellectuals like George Catlin, Britain's husband, with whom Holtby corresponded frequently over issues around fascism and liberal rationalism. It is therefore possible to read Arnold Clayton in the light of three male figures of the interwar period: D. H. Lawrence, Oswald Mosley and George Catlin.

Clayton's tortured rejection of his mother's influence and the vehement charges he lays against her for stunting his masculine personality are reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's invective against women in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. Indeed, it is interesting that the person whom Clayton so admires and envies is named after Lawrence and, like Lawrence, idolises a state with 'Real leadership!' (*TBYF*, p.39). In Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod*, the charismatic intellectual, Lilly exalts 'the submission to the heroic soul in a greater man'<sup>70</sup> and in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, written contemporaneously with *Aaron's Rod*, Lawrence articulates the same desire for a masculine leader: 'Men have to choose their leaders and obey them to the death'.<sup>71</sup> In true Lawrentian style, Dick Lawrence submits utterly to Clayton's leadership and judgement, professing to Clayton, 'I handed my judgment over to you twelve months ago' (*TBYF*, p.84). Clayton's 'National Planning Party' and its Plan for national renewal is an aggressive reaction, embodying Lawrentian and fascist ideals for 'a greater Britain, more self-conscious, more virile, more dignified' (*TBYF*, p.59).

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<sup>70</sup> Cited in Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (Chicago: Cassandra Editions, 1978; first pub. London: John Lane, 1934), p.159.

<sup>71</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, (New York: Seletzer, 1922), p.270.



Clayton's admiration for Lawrence's virility as a man of action is, however, also hinted at as an expression of homosexual desire. Lady Carter, a woman infatuated with Clayton but constantly rebuffed, openly speculates that Clayton's relationship with Lawrence is a homosexual one, confiding in Mrs. Clayton: 'while Arnold had Lawrence there'd be no room for me, nor you either, nor any woman' (*TBYF*, p.104). Lady Carter's speculations are never developed and certainly when she broaches the issue with Lawrence, he appears totally oblivious. Despite his close companionship with Lawrence, when Lawrence as head of the army challenges Clayton's political authority by sending the nation to war with Russia, Clayton is forced to shoot him. A.K. Sponenberg has suggested that Holtby's 'feminist and anti-fascist fictions, when analysed in terms of popular Freudian notions of fascism [. . .] contain negative portrayals of homosexuality'.<sup>72</sup> Certainly, it is possible to read Clayton's insinuated homosexual desire for Lawrence as part of a striving for an extreme masculinism and totalitarianism. His bid for power and homosexual desire therefore become united under a pathological psychology. Sponenberg's reading of Clayton as one of Holtby's 'negative portrayals of homosexuality', however, is complicated if we read Clayton in the light of Adler's 'inferiority complex'. This allows for a reading that, whilst it pathologises the psychological striving for power over others, does not pathologise homosexuality itself. Rather it allows a more sympathetic understanding of Clayton as the representation of masculinity in crisis, unable to express itself or live up to pervasive normalisations of manliness in the interwar period.

Moreover, homosexual desire in *Take Back Your Freedom* is only ever present in the speculations of Lady Carter. The same is true in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* where the

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<sup>72</sup> A.K. Sponenberg, 'The Pendulum is Swinging Backwards': Gender, Politics and Modernity in the Interwar Writing of Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, and Rebecca West', A&j, Diss Abs, 2002, BL: DXN060864.



decadent vamp, Felicity Cardover, (a high-class lady of leisure very much like Lady Carter) also speculates 'that Bill Durrant and Talal are homos' (MM, p.336), even though there is nothing explicit to suggest this. Instead, it is the close camaraderie between Talal and Bill that generates much of the novel's critique of imperialist relations. With this in mind, Holtby's staging of the relationship between Arnold Clayton and Dick Lawrence in *Take Back Your Freedom* is, in my view, less concerned with depicting homosexuality than with exploring D. H. Lawrence's ideal of leadership and masculine solidarity, described as 'a grand consummation for men, this mingling of many with one great impassioned purpose' in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (*Fantasia*, p.152).

Like Lawrence, Mosley too was committed to a masculinist society. His demand for 'men who are men' is perhaps one of the strongest expressions for virility and manliness in the interwar decades and summed up his determination to transform Britain from an effeminate democracy to a virile military nation. As he asserts in *The Greater Britain*, '[w]e seek to create a nation-wide movement which will replace the legislation of old women by the social sense and the will to serve of young men'<sup>73</sup>. His vision of the new fascist Britain was premised on masculine virility. He calls for 'a healthy, virile manhood to build the Greater Britain of the future'<sup>74</sup> and the fascist paper, significantly entitled *Action*, pledged to 'speak with virile accents'.<sup>75</sup> Mosley was committed to an extreme masculinism where women were relegated to the 'twilight' shadows of an appreciative audience for masculine machismo and action.

Mosley's machismo, like Mussolini's, was integral to his political popularity. As Gottlieb explains, he thrived on his sex appeal to draw women to the British Fascist movement. He presented himself with the sexual allure and panache of a

<sup>73</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: BUF, 1934; first pub. 1932), p.53.

<sup>74</sup> Oswald Mosley, *Fascism Explained: 10 Points Of Fascist Policy*, (London: B.U.F. 1932), p.7.

<sup>75</sup> Harold Nicholson, 'Editorial', *Action*, vol 1, no.1, 8 October 1933, p.1. Hull Archives.



Hollywood heart-throb at British Union of Fascist (B.U.F) meetings. Citing Mosley's cousin, Gottlieb surmises, 'It was no accident that B.U.F women were prone to "idolize him", and that Mosley should have been the object of women's infatuations' (Gottlieb, p.203). The uniforms, emblems and marching pageantry, his erotically charged rhetoric and winning smiles, and his notorious reputation as a high-class play-boy all proved potently seductive. Despite his predilections for keeping his torrid sex life out of the public arena of politics, Mosley nevertheless used his roguish charm to secure himself the status of sex icon.

In her discussion of Mosley's sexual appeal, Gottlieb highlights Holtby's play as one amongst many satirical depictions of the BUF leader, observing that 'Mosley was obviously one of the sources for the composite figure of Arnold Clayton' (Gottlieb, p.205). Holtby's dictator, Clayton, certainly shares some of Mosley's masculine machismo and similarly wins much support from amorous female admirers for his movement. Lady Carter, a high-class 'Bright Young Thing', appears as a composite portrayal of leisured female celebrities of the inter-war years, like the Cunards and the Mitford sisters, eager to embrace fascism as the latest vogue. Her desperate desires for Clayton are thwarted as she recognises that she is simply one of many; his success as a 'a matinee idol among politicians [. . .] [p]acks his meetings with hysterical women' (*TBYF*, p.41).

Similarly, Clayton's rebellion against reasoned judgment in favour of passionate action is highly reminiscent of Mosley. Clayton's party speeches thrive on the 'exposure of the impotence of the old nineteenth-century Liberal rationalist' (*TBYF*, p.27) and the sexual imagery of impotence and reason, potency and action, is deliberately inflected with gender politics. His rejection of 'Reason' and democracy is a rejection of his mother and effeminacy. He feels her 'rational responsibility' has



emasculated him: '[y]ou trained me so well in detachment and integrity that I was nearly impotent for action' (*TBYF*, p.60). Contrastingly, action connotes virile masculinity. This is a central theme of the play. Clayton's 'Plan' for his fascist Britain is to transform it into a military state with his 'Grey Army' where results come from action rather than reason. His aim is to construct a 'greater, more dignified, more virile Britain' (*TBYF*, p.112). By the end of the play, Clayton is forced to admit that this will to action is all that is left to drive him onwards: '[n]ow there is nothing left but action, action to assert my independent will' (*TBYF*, p.110).

Clayton's vision of a 'greater Britain' resonates with Mosley's seminal tract for the British Union of Fascists, *The Greater Britain*, published in 1932. Moreover, his conflict between academic procrastination and strident action reverberates with Mosley's rousing calls for national action over stultifying democratic debate. As Harold Nicholson, the editor of the fascist paper *Action* makes clear, the fascist call for action represents its strongest claim for a new political doctrine: 'The general tone and tendency of "Action" will be in harmony with that of the New Party founded by Sir Oswald Mosley. We believe with him that the happy days of Tory rectitude and Liberal intellectualism are now ended'.<sup>76</sup> Mosley affirms this in *The Greater Britain*, proclaiming that '*Fascism* is Leadership of the people with their willing consent along the path of action which they have long desired' (*The Greater Britain*, p.26).

Even at its inception, the play was a targeted critique of Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists. The title *Take Back Your Freedom* was not the title Holtby had intended for it which had been *Hope of Thousands*. When it came to publish and produce the play, Brittain, Holtby's literary executor, was compelled to change it to *Take Back Your Freedom*, 'as the original *Hope of Thousands* was

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<sup>76</sup> Harold Nicholson, 'What this Paper Stands For', *Action*, vol. 1, no.1, October 8, 1931, p.1.



considered to be too close to a song of Mosley's'.<sup>77</sup> An extract from Brittain's diary in the 1930s, also offers a good point of comparison between Mosley and Holtby's anti-hero. Whilst on a trip over to the States, Brittain recalls meeting Harold Nicholson, husband of Vita Sackville West, editor of *Action* and contributor to the fascist paper, *Blackshirt*, as well as a close collaborator of Mosley's:

At luncheon we talked of Mosley first (Nicholson knows him well & has done so from the time Mosley was eighteen & had been thrashed at Sandhurst; later after he crashed in the War & was invalided H.N. found him work running around the Foreign Office). . . Said Mosley failure was due to various psychological weaknesses – impatience, instability etc.<sup>78</sup>

No doubt, Brittain related this to Holtby on her return to London. Clayton certainly shares some of Mosley's background and psychological characteristics. Like Mosley, Clayton works at Whitehall, though importantly his political career is a substitute for fighting in the war rather than an adjunct to it, as with Mosley. Clayton's 'inferiority complex' as a non-combatant therefore accounts for the envy and eventual murder of his soldier-friend, Dick Lawrence. Clayton's character shares some of Mosley's 'impatience' and 'instability' but Holtby stages such 'psychological weakness' as an inner conflict over the efficacy of rational democracy.

In the play's preface, Brittain suggests that the conflict between the 'man of cerebration' and the 'man of action' staged in the play adds a new dimension to the psychological stereotypes of the dictator. 'Clayton', in Brittain's view, 'represents a highly organised intelligence driven to extremes by fierce reaction against scholarly

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<sup>77</sup> The Winifred Holtby Collection, Vera Brittain Letters to John Ervine, 19 May, 1939, WH/7/7.38/02/01a.

<sup>78</sup> Vera Brittain, *Diary of the Thirties: 1932-1939: Chronicle of Friendship*, ed. Alan Bishop (London: Gollancz, 1986), pp.169-70.



hesitation and philosophic doubt' (*TBYF*, p.7). Edith Shackleton, in her review of the play for *Time and Tide* elaborates on this further, suggesting that '*Take Back Your Freedom* is a political play but its characters are not mere symbols. The dictator who rises is not a mere cartoonist's version of Hitler-Mussolini but an English intellectual'.<sup>79</sup> Brittain and Shackleton are both right to highlight this extra 'intellectual' dimension to Holtby's dictator. Clayton is fleetingly compared to 'a pocket Mussolini' (*TBYF*, p.58), locating him in a line of dictators 'from Caesar to Hitler' (*TBYF*, p.60) but Oswald Mosley is the main point of comparison. This satiric characterisation of Mosley is, however, given depth by incorporating an intellectual crisis over rational liberalism developed via Holtby's correspondence with Vera Brittain's husband, George Catlin. Clayton, like Catlin, is an academic and regarded as the 'Don in Politics' by his peers (*TBYF*, p.21).

One of the ways this is achieved in the play is through the re-staging of Mosley's infamous 'Olympia Meeting', held at the Olympia Stadium in West Kensington in 1934. One anonymous reviewer of *Take Back Your Freedom* for *Time and Tide* observed:

Up to the moment of attaining power his [Clayton's] career follows very closely upon that of Mosley . He has his 'plan', his private army, his catchwords about order and discipline, his idiotic female admirers. Even the famous Olympia meeting which was the turning point in Mosley's career and probably robbed him of his chance of getting working-class following figures in Scene Three.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Edith Shackleton, 'Newly Published Plays' *Time And Tide*, 8 July 1939, pp.916-918 (p.918).

<sup>80</sup> Anon., 'The Arts: A Review Of Theatre, Films, Music, Ballet And Exhibitions', *Time And Tide*, 24 Aug 1940, pp.866-868 (p.866).



The so-called 'Olympia Meeting' was surrounded by scandal and notoriety in the media. The violent attacks throughout the meeting shocked the attending British public. Outraged responses to the meetings followed with the *Times* publishing a letter of protest, signed by three Conservative MP's, as well as the publication of a pamphlet, entitled *Fascists at Olympia*, presenting statements from eye-witnesses and those who were injured.<sup>81</sup> The reviewer above remarks that the meeting lost Mosley his 'working-class following' since one of the most violent attacks during the meeting was on a working-class man thrown out of the meeting and down the stadium steps. Not only was the man injured but also humiliated by having his trousers pulled down, apparently a favourite trick of the Blackshirts against opponents (Julie Gottlieb, p.210; p.225). Holtby depicts this more brutally in *Take Back Your Freedom*, where a working-class, Jewish man is thrown out of one of Arnold Clayton's meetings in Manchester, down the steps and dies as a result of his injuries. The incident is related rather than staged to make the important point that Clayton's party rhetoric can be twisted to cover-up its brutality. The members of his 'Grey Guard' responsible for killing Levi are denounced as 'agents provocateurs': 'You know those men who threw Levi out at Manchester weren't our men. They were spies' (*TBYF*, p.73).

This incident in the play, however, serves not only to flag up the escalating violence of Clayton's fascist government but also to indicate his growing addiction to 'action' over reason. As he admits, 'When I don't think, I enjoy it enormously. Action is a drug' (*TBYF*, p.67). Holtby herself seems not to have attended Mosley's mass 'Olympia' meeting in 1934 but her friend, Vera Brittain, along with her husband, George Catlin, did. Brittain offers an account of the meeting in her second autobiography, *Testament of Experience*, recounting 'listening for two hours to a dull

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<sup>81</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience: An Autobiographical Story of the Years 1925-1950*, ed. Paul Berry (London: Virago, 1979; first pub. 1957), p.109.



speech on economics' delivered by the B.U.F leader, Oswald Mosley, 'punctuated by wild attacks on interrupters for which he appeared to stop' (*Testament of Experience*, p.108). The meeting reportedly ended with a shower of Communist, anti-fascist leaflets raining down on the heads of listeners from the roof-girders above which prompted Blackshirts to scramble after Communist hecklers up into the stadium roof. Brittain was evidently shocked by the violence but her husband, George Catlin, seems rather to have been awed by it, as a letter to Holtby indicates:

You will have heard from Vera all about Mosley's meeting. For me it was an odd sensation. I felt myself much as, I suppose, a war correspondent feels. The atmosphere of riot was definitely a pleasant feeling, like being in an aeroplane as it lands. But the pleasantness was joined to, and dependent on, the feeling of complete detachment from what was happening. Intellectually, both parties seemed to me to have an arguable case – those on the platform and those in the roof-girders. I agreed with neither. And emotionally they both, I found, produced in me mild irritation. I liked the danger and disliked the fighters . . . Yes: I do think Mosley's Olympian tournament, with its parting of the forces and the thunderbolts has done me some good. I think I may see direction.<sup>82</sup>

Catlin appears to mirror Clayton here, getting high on his close proximity to action and 'danger'. His welcome attitude to 'the atmosphere of riot' offers him a glimpse of combat as he likens himself to a 'war correspondent'. The 'action' or violence of Mosley's mass meeting presents Catlin with affirmative 'direction' and appears to overwrite his intellectual indecision. Catlin's response to the Olympia meeting exhibits the same frustrated dissatisfaction with intellectualism and the same

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<sup>82</sup> William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, George Catlin Letters to Winifred Holtby, 8 June 1934, Box 158.



exhilaration for action that we see characterised in Clayton's conflict between reason and action in the play.

Catlin's correspondence to Holtby in the early thirties was riddled with his intellectual indecision over which political movement, Fascist or Marxist, offered the best solution to the crisis in liberalism. His interest in British politics as a political scientist had moved him to follow the 1929 elections closely. Though, as Brittain details in *Testament of Experience*, Baldwin's postwar government had brought stability and peace, it failed to alleviate the problems of declining export markets, the slump in staple industries such as mining and the resultant high unemployment levels. When Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government won the election in 1929, Catlin felt obliged to offer his services. Through a London political group, Catlin had been introduced to Oswald Mosley as a fellow political researcher, so when Catlin decided to work for the Labour Party in 1929, Mosley was his first point of contact. At this time, Mosley was a member of the Labour Party, working as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (*Testament of Experience*, pp.58-9). Mosley and Catlin, it seemed, worked together closely for the Labour Party, so closely that when Mosley decided to resign from the party over unemployment policy, Brittain wrote anxiously to her husband: 'You won't, I imagine, depart from the Labour Party with Young, Strachey, Brown and Lady Cynthia? [. . .] It doesn't seem to me that in a Mosley group there would be much room for anyone but Mosley' (*Testament of Experience*, p.65).

Catlin did not leave to join Mosley's new party in February 1931 and formally distanced himself from Mosley after this time. Yet his letters to Holtby over this period reflect an inner struggle between Mosley's politics and his own. Regardless of his acknowledgment to Brittain that Mosley's new party was 'Fascist-militant'



(*Testament of Experience*, p.65), to Holtby he confided a certain admiration for Mosley's political extremism. Describing himself caught in the 'typical plight of the liberal', he intimates 'I could go and become Mosley's Goebbels, enjoying myself in an ecstasy of loyalty of which I have need – and I won't . . . at the moment they attract and by the morrow I feel nausea'.<sup>83</sup> The attraction for Catlin appears to have been the strident action implicit both in fascism and communism:

I am all in favour, not only of reason, but of compromise. Much of the weakness of my character lies precisely in that indecision and preference for compromise and caution – that extreme slowness in making a decision. Fundamentally, however, I like extremism, the simplicity and religious devotion of the extremist who gets things done.

I am always in pursuit of rational extremism.<sup>84</sup>

Catlin proclaims himself a man of reason whilst simultaneously lamenting the inefficacy of such a rational liberal position. He senses that his rational posture is a 'weakness', full of 'indecision', 'compromise' and 'caution'. His attraction to 'extremism' lies in its 'simplicity' and its ability 'to get things done'. The same weary frustration with reason is echoed by Arnold Clayton in *Take Back Your Freedom* when he confesses 'I had been reasonable for too long. I was tired of words and wanted action. Action!' (*TBYF*, p.35).

Arnold Clayton is therefore, as Julie Gottlieb rightly identifies, a 'composite' character, articulating traits from D. H. Lawrence and George Catlin in addition to Mosley. As a result, Holtby not only roots the rise of fascist dictatorships in a masculine 'inferiority complex' about virility and action but also in an intellectual and

<sup>83</sup> William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, George Catlin Letters to Winifred Holtby, 8 June 1934, Box 158.

<sup>84</sup> William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, George Catlin to Winifred Holtby, 19 May 1934, Box 158.



political 'inferiority complex' about the efficacy of the rational liberal position to answer the needs of the 1930s economic and political climate.

### **Women in the Fascist State**

*Take Back Your Freedom* stages the process through which Arnold Clayton's 'inferiority complex', engendered by his mother's commitment to rationalism, seeks compensation in his desire for action and dominance. As argued above, his mother's own 'inferiority complex', generated by her own thwarted ambitions, strives for compensation through her son but succeeds only in propelling him along the path of his own 'inferiority complex'. The vicious circle of 'inferiority complexes' that we saw between mother and son in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* manifests itself once again. Arnold Clayton himself alludes to the detrimental effects of closeting intelligent women in the home at the start of the play:

I've wondered sometimes whether we're wise in letting loose so much superfluous power unattached to a machine as we do when we take away clever women from their work.  
(*TBYF*, p.35)

This insight emerges from a discussion of his mother having 'to give up her job when she married' (*TBYF*, p.35). The implication here is that this 'superfluous power' of his mother has impinged on his development into a manly man. Yet despite such insight at the beginning of his rise to power, Clayton nevertheless continues to perpetuate the vicious circle of 'Inferiority Complexes' by implementing a Hitleresque 'back to home' policy.

This is most strikingly demonstrated by the assassination attempt on Clayton. The perpetrator is a woman and although she fails and is shot off-stage, her brief



dialogue with Clayton exposes the intense anxiety that professional women like Holtby felt at the prospect of fascist government. Clayton solves the British problems of unemployment by following Hitler's example of removing undesirables from the workforce, 'by dismissing the women and conscripting all the men' (*TBYF*, p.85). The woman's desperate attempt on Clayton's life is revenge for 'the crippled ineffective life' which Clayton's government affords her (*TBYF*, p.92). The woman feels compelled to kill Clayton, not simply because he is a fascist, but because she feels he has betrayed his female supporters: 'Do you think you would have ever gained your present position if thousands had not longed for what you advocated? [. . .] We would have followed you. Then you had all women dismissed from paid employment' (*TBYF*, p.93).

This woman, like Clayton's own mother, articulates Holtby's commitment to women's right to equal work opportunities under the rubric of rational liberalism, reiterating 'we wanted to be free as human beings' (*TBYF*, p.93). The parallels between this woman's and Clayton's mother's stunted intellectual and professional ambitions are made clear:

I am a married woman with two children, and I love them. But even love is poisoned when the creative impulse has no other outlet. I was a journalist. I wrote political articles. Everyday of my life was full of interest. I observed, I inquired, I judged, I criticised, I explained. My faculties for curiosity and knowledge were completely occupied. The whole range of public action lay before me . . .

. . . A home should be a refuge not a prison – a place to return to after a day's work, not a trap. Do you now what it is like to be shut up within the circle of your personal relationships, your domestic preoccupations? We had been happy. We had loved each other. Now, because I was a journalist you said, cease writing; because I was a woman you said, go home! (*TBYF*, pp.93-94)



The woman makes two related points about Clayton's infringements on personal liberty: the freedom of speech and freedom to work. Like Holtby herself, this woman was a former 'journalist' and the restrictions on the press are for her contingent with restrictions placed on the exercise of her intelligence and abilities in the public sphere. As she argues, 'my tools had been taken from me, then I knew what it was to be savage, starving and frustrated' (*TBYF*, p.94).

This exercise of the mental faculties is, however, precisely what Clayton believes he should free women from:

I have done everything possible to cure this evil of frustrated womanhood. I have withdrawn women from the soulless routine and inhumanity of offices into the intimate circle of personal relationships. I have offered them wedding premiums, provided higher wages for married men, encouraged greater social freedom, endowed maternity, restored the home to its proper social prestige. I have given you chances as no woman had before for love and child-bearing. (*TBYF*, p.92)

Clayton's speech reveals the complicated relations between women's emancipation and fascist notions of 'freedom'. On one score, Clayton's fascist policy has apparently alleviated the 'frustrated womanhood' of the spinster as 'superfluous woman', forced to work because there are no marriageable men to financially support her. He has also removed the imperative for women to work in underpaid and monotonous jobs. Having 'restored the home to its proper prestige', Clayton feels he has fulfilled women's desires by privileging maternity and eliminating working single women as 'blacklegs' and working married women as 'double-earners' from the workforce. Certainly in the reality of 1930s Europe, women did not always repudiate but sometimes welcomed such policies. In her 1934 article, 'Black Words for Women



Only', Holtby observes that one German mother had recently contributed to the Manchester Guardian in defence of Hitler's remedy for unemployment: 'The German people led by their great Führer, are today labouring for the rebirth of their nation and of morals [. . .] Woman has again been recognised as the centre of family life, and today it has become a pleasure and honour again to be a mother' (TG, p.86). Mosley himself reaffirms this attitude in his appraisal of Hitler's treatment of women in the workforce, remarking that the Nazi policy on women's employment and marriage subsidies were a '“a piece of tyranny” under which, I imagine, many young English women would be quite glad to suffer' (cited in Gottlieb, p.208). Holtby, however, was not one of these women and remained sceptical, reiterating in this article the message expressed by her would-be assassin, that '[t]he “normal” woman knows that, given freedom and equality before the law, she can be trusted to safeguard her own interests as wife, mother, daughter, or what you will' (*ibid*).

There is also perhaps a note of caution here in Holtby's depiction of Clayton's gender policy. The socialist underpinnings of Clayton's remedy for unemployment are plain and not surprising given that fascist leaders like Mosley, Hitler and Mussolini had emerged from the left-wing. Clayton's implementations of 'endowed maternity' and 'higher wages for men' have a striking resonance for interwar feminist debate. As outlined earlier on in this study, Eleanor Rathbone as head of 'New Feminism', had campaigned for motherhood endowments and tailored feminist demands to the Labour Movement's priority of securing the 'family wage'. She privileged the 'woman-centred' feminist perspective, seeking improvement for women in the home through motherhood endowment and birth control, as well as in the work-place through protective legislation. Holtby, despite proclaiming herself an 'Equality First Feminist' rather than 'New Feminist' in 1926, was sympathetic to



some of these aims. Though she contested protective legislation, her work increasingly recognised the importance of maternal welfare and birth control. Her last novel, *South Riding*, broaches such issues through the portrayal of the working-class Holly family. Therefore, though not opposed to the objectives of 'New Feminism', Holtby does offer a cautionary note in *Take Back Your Freedom*, warning that such feminist demands are open to manipulation by fascism. Clayton has after all 'endowed motherhood', recognising the value of maternity to the state, but there is no assurance that this money would be given directly to the mother rather than the male breadwinner, as was the crucial stipulation in Rathbone's feminist proposal. In her analysis of 'The Cult of the Cradle' in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, Holtby herself is forced to admit that 'respect for maternity is naturally not in itself a bad thing' but adds that 'the danger in this attitude lies in its element of compulsion, its emphasis on physical experience, its attempt to shape all women into one mould' (*Women*, pp.168-9). This is precisely what Clayton has enforced and what the would-be female assassin protests against.

The very fact that the only means of rebellion open to the female assassin is violence remains indicative of her restricted freedom. Without the freedom to write as a journalist, this woman has no options left but to imitate the aggressive masculinism of Clayton's military state. This is accentuated by the way the woman must masquerade as a man in order to get close enough to Clayton for the assassination attempt. Deprived of the 'natural weapons of irony and eloquence and information against [Clayton's] creed of violence' (*TBYF*, p.95), the women of *Take Back Your Freedom* are forced to resort to assassination. The first woman's attempt on Clayton's life is a precursor to the play's violent finale when Mrs. Clayton herself is forced to shoot her beloved son to stop the fascist war machine. Significantly, she kills him



with the same revolver used by the previous woman. Although she had been the initial inspiration for his political aspirations, Mrs. Clayton now sees that Clayton's dictatorship has steered the nation away from 'rational responsibility' and freedom (*TBYF*, p.42). The nation has become captive to false notions of emotional solidarity and religious idolatry and Clayton has become chained to the desires of the mob. The only way back to freedom and democracy is to shoot Clayton and to allow herself to be arrested, tried and imprisoned. She appeals urgently to his followers: 'You must destroy him – and me because I made him what he has become and I gave him to you. Take back your freedom' (*TBYF*, p.127).

In fact, the only means that Holtby presents for her female characters to counter Clayton's dictatorship is highly questionable and raises broad debates around feminism and pacifism in the 1930s. Clayton's mother's words and her actions pose some difficult questions for interwar feminism: are mothers complicit in the formation and preservation of oppressive dictatorships and are they justified in using violent means to end them? In this light, not only does *Take Back Your Freedom* rupture simplistic assumptions that feminists are anti-fascists but also that women, and more specifically mothers, are natural pacifists. Mrs. Clayton's final resolution to murder her son stands entirely at odds with her early Schreineresque comments<sup>85</sup>: 'If you young men knew the trouble it takes to produce a human body you'd be a little less airy about your disposal of it' (*TBYF*, p.50). Equally, the would-be female assassin stresses that only 'hunger fiercer than life itself would have driven me to violate my nature so far that I must try to kill you' (*TBYF*, p.94). To some extent, this reveals the ultimate sacrifice made by the female characters but it also emphasises their

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<sup>85</sup> Olive Schreiner for instance writes 'There is, perhaps, no woman, whether she have borne children, or be merely potentially a child-bearer, who could look down upon a battlefield covered with slain, but the thought would rise in her, So many mothers' sons!'. Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, ed. Jane Graves, (London: Virago, 1978; first pub. 1911), p.170.



'Inferiority Complexes' that cannot be surmounted in a socially constructive way. The vicious circle of 'Inferiority Complexes' has created a dystopia in *Take Back Your Freedom* that can only be remedied by destruction. Holtby's play challenges the audience to consider the bigger question of whether democracy should be defended through force. It interrogates the efficacy of pacifism in a decade where reason and ideals were faltering before the overwhelming sense of national insecurity.

As Holtby was composing *Take Back Your Freedom* in 1934, she was also engaging with debates about pacifism and armament through her contribution to Storm Jameson's anti-war volume, *Challenge to Death*. Like many feminists and liberal intellectuals, Holtby speculated on the final solution to escalating national insecurity. 'The obligation is upon us', Holtby concludes, 'to end the system under which war remains the accepted final stroke of national policy' (Apology, p.137).<sup>86</sup> But Holtby's pacifism, unlike her friend Vera Brittain, had its limits. She believed that the notion of 'collective security' for nations under the League of Nations could prevent war with the deployment of an international air force, funded by the League, to police the skies. This was key to pacifist debates in the 1930s and with it comes the suggestion that moderate force should be used to prevent wide-scale war. Mrs. Clayton's choice to shoot her son to prevent Britain's war with Russia speaks directly to this issue of preventative force.

Holtby's position on how to avert the fascist war machine, however, is not decisive. Much doubt still pervades the play about the efficacy of force, as the first assassination attempt on Clayton insinuates. The woman who makes the first attempt on Clayton's life does so precisely because she has no other option and despite the knowledge that death 'cannot kill an idea' (*TBYF*, p.95). History, it seems, has played

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<sup>86</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Apology for Armourers' in *Challenge to Death*, by Philip Noel Barker et al (London: Constable and Co, 1934), p.136.



out Holtby's prophecy: totalitarianism does not die with the dictator. Although, Holtby seems undecided as to where the solutions to fascism might lie, between force and reason, the self-reflexive note in *Take Back Your Freedom* insistently affirms the 'natural weapons' of the writer - 'irony and eloquence and information' – against the fascist creed (*TBYF*, p.95). Where both the would-be female assassin and Mrs. Clayton have lost these powers of interrogation and protest, Holtby asserts her own privileges of intellectual and artistic freedom in the very act of writing the play. She thereby affirms her capacity as a rational and political thinker, attempting to avert international disaster with the 'natural weapons' of the writer.



## Conclusions

Holtby's work from the late 1920s airs concern over 'The Cult of the Cradle', both in its extreme form in the fascist corporate state and in its more dilute form through legislation and baby boom propaganda in Britain. She understands the new psychological and mothercraft theories on child-care as another expression of this 'cult'. Whilst she acknowledges that it can have advantages for both mothers and infants, she remains dubious over whether this attention to maternity compromises women's professional and political interests beyond the home. Adapting Alfred Adler's psychological theory of the 'inferiority complex' from the childhood psychology in mothering manuals, Holtby demonstrates that 'The Cult of the Cradle' breeds 'inferiority complexes' at all levels, in mothers, sons and entire nations.

*Mandoa, Mandoa!* and *Take Back Your Freedom* both explore the concept of the 'inferiority complex', interrogating the origins and outcomes of reactionary nationalism and fascism. Holtby's work explores the applicability of Adler's concept of the 'inferiority complex' to a feminist critique of nationalism, imperialism and fascism. Her work illustrates how all of these trends in 1930s culture can be linked to a crisis in masculinity, traceable to guilt for non-participation in the First World War and to women's political, financial and intellectual emancipation. Holtby's aptitude as a cultural barometer, however, fails to yield any solutions to the psychological crisis of her generation. Both the endings of *Mandoa, Mandoa!* and *Take Back Your Freedom* envisage modern society as having reached a crux. The close of *Take Back Your Freedom* perhaps demonstrates this most strikingly, where Holtby seems to be stranded between the outmoded rationalism of nineteenth century liberalism and outright militancy.



Yet the reader and audience are encouraged to draw some solace from Holtby's *Take Back Your Freedom*. In the very act of writing her anti-dictatorship play, Holtby testifies to the power of women authors to interrogate the interwar obsession with sexual division, so disturbingly encapsulated in Oswald Mosley's call for 'men who are men and women who are women'. Though the only path outside of the mother-son 'inferiority complex' proves to be destruction, Holtby's play leads the reader towards a psychological analysis of political trends. In this, she strives to overcome the cultural 'inferiority complex' of the interwar generation by convincing them that the events of world politics can be changed on a very personal level: perhaps by adopting Adler's theories to forestall the development of their own 'Hitler in the Cradle'.

## Conclusion

This thesis has considered Winifred Holtby's place within a feminist history of ideas. It departs from previous Holtby scholarship by refusing to privilege Holtby's friendship with Vera Brittain as the main intellectual influence on Holtby's feminism. As I discussed at the beginning of Chapter 1, Brittain's 'Bible of the Woman's Movement' was Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* (1911).<sup>1</sup> Holtby, however, did not accept this work as her 'Bible', preferring Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) instead. This inspires her sustained commitment to a rational and intellectual resistance to sexual division and the obsession with instinct between the wars.

Numerous scholars have recognised Holtby's importance as a woman of her time. Despite this, Holtby's engagement with the popular reception of Freudian theories of instinct and her criticism of fascist gender ideology have not been given a great deal of attention. This study has sought to rectify this. Holtby's resistance to psychology and fascism contributes to broader questions in feminist history around sexual difference and equality, as well as reason and feeling. Holtby draws on previous feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Brontë to indicate that the progress of historical and political change is swinging against women's emancipation in the interwar years. Holtby warns her readers of the potentially destructive consequences of this backward swing by adopting Alfred Adler's psychological concept of the 'inferiority complex' to forecast the outbreak of another world war. What we constantly see in Holtby's work is one account of historical progress working against another: the feminist history she invokes via Wollstonecraft,

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<sup>1</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, preface by Shirley Williams (London: Virago, 1999; first pub. Gollancz 1933), p.41.



Brontë and Adler against the visions of modernity influenced by Freud and fascism. In many ways, Holtby seems very like her own spinster schoolmistress, Sarah Burton, whose ‘impersonal hopes do not march with history’.<sup>2</sup> Each chapter of this thesis reveals how Wollstonecraft, Brontë and Adler embody Holtby’s ‘impersonal hopes’ to overcome the civil inequalities of sexual division.

Chapter 1 analysed Holtby’s renewed feminist calls for women’s equal civil rights through her reception of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*. Holtby reads the backlash against women’s rights to equal education and employment opportunities after the First World War as a ‘revolt against reason’, in which Mosley, Freud and D. H. Lawrence figure prominently. Emulating Wollstonecraft’s analytical framework of reason and passion, Holtby finds that the ‘revolt against reason’ is a realm of passion, where passion has become synonymous with instinct under the influence of Freud. Freud’s psychological theories represent the intellectual scaffolding for the ‘revolt against reason’ in Holtby’s view. This does not mean, however, that she rejects psychology. Rather, she understands how feminism can adapt psychology to an analysis of social, economic and political inequalities. In this way, Holtby follows the example set by Wollstonecraft over a hundred years before her. *Women and a Changing Civilisation* therefore becomes her contribution to a tradition of feminist theory, as she explores the psychological effects and motivations for sexual inequality. Through considering Wollstonecraft alongside Virginia Woolf and Eleanor Rathbone, Holtby argues for women’s psychological ‘character as a human being’ and diagnoses the psychological motives for masculine dominance.

Holtby’s fiction often alludes to Charlotte Brontë’s novels and Chapter 2 considered how such allusions expressed Holtby’s feminist commitments. Charlotte

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<sup>2</sup> Winifred Holtby, *South Riding: An English Landscape* (London: Virago, 1988; repr. 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2000; first pub. Collins & Co, 1936), p.254.

Brontë figures in Holtby's romance plots as a tantalising lure to the 'feminine middlebrow' reader, promising the wish-fulfilment of romantic union. Holtby's allusions to *Shirley* and *Jane Eyre* entice the reader into identifying with her spinster protagonists. Holtby, however, subverts the romance plot in both cases and leaves the reader full of questions about why the spinster does not marry and whether there can be a happy ending without marriage. Such questions encourage the reader to look out from the novel towards a critical contemplation of the interwar pressures exerted on women to marry, have children and avoid the fate of the 'old maid'. In *The Crowded Street* and *South Riding* Holtby reverses psychological claims that spinsters are prone to neuroses because they remain outside the heterosexual matrix. Holtby's novels depict the wives and mothers as equally if not more prone to harmful frustrations and neuroses when their lives are constricted to home and maternity. Holtby presses for her readers not to be seduced by the romance plot presented to them by the cultural and political climate between the wars in the form of marriage bars and fascist 'back to home' policies. By foiling the anticipated Brontë marriage plot in her novels, Holtby urges her reader to recognise the importance of work as well as love in women's lives.

Chapter 3 focused on Holtby's representation of maternity, an aspect of her work which has been rarely commented upon previously. Alfred Adler's psychological concept of the 'inferiority complex' enables Holtby to question whether advances in mothering education and child-care are in fact moving in the direction of women's progress. The fascist emphasis on maternity alerts Holtby to the possibility that the interwar emphasis on mothercraft might work against women's freedom of choice by playing into the hands of fascist gender ideology. In Holtby's view, women should not allow themselves to be swept back into the home to devote themselves to raising



children without asking questions. Holtby highlights how women, like herself, who do not have children are made to feel inferior, as are women with only one child. Yet, Holtby detects that the cultural emphasis on maternity suggests that all women should be mothers regardless of their abilities. In her view, this also creates ‘inferiority complexes’ amongst mothers who either feel they cannot live up to the exacting standards of interwar motherhood, or feel devalued when forced to sacrifice their creative, professional, intellectual or political ambitions. Holtby offers a fascinating insight into how the veneration of maternity and the rise of fascist politics can become mutually reinforcing and self-perpetuating. In *Mandoa, Mandoa!* and *Take Back Your Freedom* she suggests that the ‘inferiority complexes’ experienced by mothers can be passed onto their sons. In the absence of fathers, these sons feel that their mother’s influence emasculates them and strive to compensate for their ‘Inferiority Complexes’ through nationalist and fascist politics. Holtby points to Adler’s ‘inferiority complex’ as a way of understanding how women’s sense of devaluation and inequality can produce further inequality, as well as ideological and political violence on a national scale. This thesis is the first study to consider Holtby’s feminism and fiction in the light of Adler’s theories. Apart from Phyllis Lassner, few have considered Adler’s impact on feminist writers of the interwar period and it seems to me that there is more scope for considering Adler’s reception into feminism between the wars.

Holtby’s *Take Back Your Freedom* presents a nightmarish vision of a future fascist Britain, where Mosley’s demand for ‘men who are men and women who are women’ has become a reality.<sup>3</sup> It is a world predicated on biological and social divisions, not only between men and women but also between whites and Jews, as well as between the elite and the masses. Holtby’s concept of feminist history and her

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<sup>3</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: B.U.F., 1932; repr. 1934), p.54.

ideals for the future constantly seek to surmount such divisions. At the close of *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, she imagines a world where '[w]e might, perhaps, consider individuals as individuals, not primarily as members of this or that race, sex and status'.<sup>4</sup>

We can see Holtby's work also striving to overcome other kinds of political divisions between women themselves. For example, despite Holtby's claim that she is an 'Equality Feminist', Eleanor Rathbone's treatise for so-called 'New Feminism', *The Disinherited Family*, positively influences her work, as Chapter 1 demonstrates. Furthermore, in Chapter 3, we see how she also follows the 'New Feminist' turn towards issues around motherhood from the late 1920s. Both Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate how even divisions between the spinster and mother are not as wide as fascists like Mosley proclaim. In 1934, Mosley had asserted that spinster politicians were 'a distressing type' that distracted political attention away from the real interests of wives and mothers.<sup>5</sup> Holtby's work reveals that spinsters and mothers could work together to solve problems of childcare. She also indicates that wives and mothers were not necessarily exempt from the mental illnesses that interwar popular psychology claimed were solely the affliction of unmarried women. In Holtby's work, wives and mothers are also prone to frustration and neuroses under the pressures of conforming to their feminine role. Equally, spinsters are not necessarily pathological menaces but able to find happiness and fulfilment in public work.

There are, however, concerns about biological, social and political divisions that have not been fully explored in this thesis. Though I have offered some discussion of Holtby's representations of the middle-class and the aristocracy, there is more to be

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<sup>4</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (Chicago: Cassandra Editions, 1978; first pub. London: John Lane, 1934), p.192.

<sup>5</sup> Oswald Mosley, 'Fascism Will End the Battle of the Sexes: Women Will be Free to Choose Careers, Direct Representation in Parliament', *The Fascist Week*, No. 10, 12-18 January, 1934, p.5.



said on how working-class men and women are portrayed in her fiction. The reformed prostitutes who hover round the edge of *The Crowded Street*'s middle-class codes of feminine propriety, the men standing in the labour queues of *Mandoa, Mandoa!* and the destitute Holly family of *South Riding* are but a few examples. Equally, there is the question of racial difference. After witnessing the racial and social divisions of South African society in 1926, Holtby was alerted to how race, gender and class intersected in imperialism and nationalism. As the 1930s progressed, she increasingly connected the fascist demand for sexual division with racism. *Women and a Changing Civilisation* closes with a stark rejoinder to Mosley's demand for 'men who are men and women who are women'. 'He can find them', Holtby tells us, 'at their quintessence in the slave markets of Abyssinia and in the winding alleys of a Chinese city' (*Women*, p.193).

Many of Holtby's more developed ideas on race and class only started to emerge in the 1930s when she grew to maturity as a writer and intellectual thinker and would benefit from being located within a wider context of other interwar women's writing and feminist thought. The feminist journal, *Time and Tide*, would provide a good starting point for such a project. Attention to *Time and Tide* as a site for the exchange of intellectual and political ideas would locate Holtby's thought in the context of what was a highly eclectic intellectual network. Chapter 1 of this thesis makes some initial observations on this via Mary Wollstonecraft. Future research, however, might develop how Socialist and working class writers who Holtby met through the *Time and Tide* network influenced her thought and fiction. These might include the Socialist M.P. Ellen Wilkinson and the working-class writer on the home, Leonora Eyles. The Jamaican poet and dramatist, Una Marsden, also contributed to

*Time and Tide* and her influence on Holtby's 1930s fiction, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* in particular, deserves further investigation.

Holtby lived and worked in an interwar world determined to re-establish order after the catastrophic upheaval of the First World War by reinforcing sexual division. Holtby, however contested this as a solution to economic depression and national insecurity and cautioned that it may lead to further conflict. For Holtby, the interwar decades were characterised by psychological insecurities on personal and political, national and international levels. The 'Freudian Revelation' identified and categorised these psychological phenomena, whilst fascism, through its appeals to division, order and national security, answered them. As Holtby wrote in 1934, 'The world at the moment is in a state of hysteria' (*Women*, p.133). Holtby was a feminist intellectual who strove to reason with this 'hysteria' and warn her generation of its potentially cataclysmic consequences, though she never lived to see her suspicions confirmed. Instead of 'men who are men and women who are women', Holtby maintained that 'what we really seem to need at this juncture in our affairs is enlightened common sense'.<sup>6</sup> In its own prophetic way, Holtby's own 'enlightened common sense' is the enduring strength of her feminist thought.

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<sup>6</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Hitler and the German Relief Committee', *Time and Tide* ('Notes on the Way'), 21 October 1933 in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp.168-69 (p.169).



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